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The Best
One-Act Plays
of
1938

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The Best
One-Act Plays
of
1938

Selected by
J. W. MARRIOTT^J
Editor of "One-Act Plays of To-day"
"Great Modern British Plays" etc.
Author of "The Theatre" etc.



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Foreword

THIS is the eighth volume in the series of *The Best One-Act Plays* of the year, and contains the best twelve which the editor has been able to discover among the plays written in 1938. Eight of them come from authors who have not been represented in previous collections. Only two have already appeared in printed form.

The amateurs are the only people who take the one-act play seriously. The professional stage continues to ignore it although its 'full-length' plays are often disappointingly short. Years ago there were 'curtain-raisers' lasting twenty minutes or so before the main play began, and the ancient Greeks often used short plays at the end; but our own theatre has no time for either.

Still, the one-act play continues to be written and performed in enormous numbers. In the British Drama League tournament this year more than six hundred teams competed most of them offering one-acters, and there were three hundred and forty-nine entries in Scotland. Apart from these activities, there are many local competitions in places like Blackpool, and there are others connected with women's institutes, boys' clubs, schools, colleges, commercial firms and the like. The amateur movement is very much alive.

But one can foresee other uses of the one-act play in broadcast drama, television, and the film. The makers of films are beginning to think about the possibility of short films treated as serious art and performed by the great stars. The public is beginning to realize the absurdity of giving

the reading of two novels in one day. Many people do it, admittedly, but the result is far from satisfying, the two stories being sadly mixed in the memory, and the final impression being little more than a blur which rapidly disappears. One full-length film lasting ninety minutes or more, a short film of about thirty minutes, followed by the news-reel, a silly symphony, and trailers of forthcoming attractions, would make an ideal programme.

The editor of these annual collections is always on the look-out for new authors of merit. One of the features of 1938 has been the rapid advance of the plays of Mr T. B. Morris, an extremely versatile writer using both verse and prose, who is represented in this volume by *Cats of Egypt*. In claiming for the one-act play a rich variousness of idea there is no single new author who by the imagination and inventiveness of his work better deserves to be cited among the new writers than does Mr Morris. We shall hear much more of him during the next few years. His three-act plays *The Beautiful One* and *King's Rest* are likely to be popular.

There are several other authors whose work is promising. They are fertile in ideas and are quickly mastering the technique of play-writing. Among the four established contributors Mr Harold Brighouse has written a farcical theme about the September crisis, which one can only hope is not prophetic, and Mr Rubinstein has harked back to the early days of Christianity.

America is represented by two plays: a powerful and moving drama by Paul Green and an amusing Mexican folk-play by Josephina Niggli. The latter made its first appearance in this country in 1938.

J. W. M.

Acknowledgments

THE compiler desires to express his thanks to the following authors and publishers for permission given to print the plays in this volume:

The authors for *Plans for the Coronation*, *The Fullest Hole*, *After the Tempest*, *Cats of Egypt*, *First Corinthians*, *One of those Letters*, *Nocturne*, *Nicodemus*; the author and Messrs Samuel French, Ltd., for *The Southern Cross*, and *Sunday Costs Five Pesos*; the author and Messrs A. Watt and Sons for *Newgate's the Fashion*; and the author and the International One-Act Play Theatre for *The High-backed Chair*.

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Plans for the Coronation

By Bertram Henson

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CHARACTERS

ARCHBISHOP

LORD CHAMBERLAIN

PRIME MINISTER

MAJOR-DOMO

TWO LACKEYS

SCENE: *An ante-chamber to the throne-room in a
royal palace.*

TIME: *Present day.*

*Applications regarding amateur performances of this play should
be addressed to Messrs Samuel French, Ltd., 26 Southampton
Street, Strand, London, W.C.2, or 25 West 45th Street, New
York*

Plans for the Coronation

The scene is a draped chamber. Gold chairs, a long table, etc. Two lackeys with powdered hair enter and stand at attention by double doors on the left of the spectator. The Major-domo, an old, wizened man in court costume, hobbles in. He is followed by an Archbishop, a tall, thin, ascetic priest in a cardinal's mourning attire, violet cassock with train, mantilla, skull-cap, and biretta. The latter he carries in his hand.

MAJOR-DOMO [*whispering*]. The Lord Chamberlain—er—will receive your Grace.

ARCHBISHOP [*awed—whispering back—nervous*]. Thanks very much. Do I wait here?

MAJOR-DOMO. Pray be seated. The Prime Minister has not yet arrived.

ARCHBISHOP. Thank you.

[The Major-domo retires. He is followed by the lackeys. The Archbishop coughs, looks round the room, consults his watch, and sits in a chair. He is nervous and agitated. There is a pause.]

[The Lord Chamberlain enters from the throne-room on the right of the spectator—a well-built, middle-aged man.]

CHAMBERLAIN [*affably*]. Archbishop!

ARCHBISHOP [*rising and offering his hand*]. Er—how do you do?

~~himself?~~ CHAMBERLAIN. The Prime Minister may be a little late. I
PRIME MINIST... ~~is holiday.~~ He is coming from Sicily, and
Oh, what?

ARCHBISHOP. Terrible business this, Mr Chamberlain. How did it actually happen? The newspapers merely say——

CHAMBERLAIN. Well, the Press account is official. His Majesty was thrown from his horse. Death was instantaneous.

ARCHBISHOP. Dear me! The Queen was there?

CHAMBERLAIN. At the Archduke's castle—yes. They are all there.

ARCHBISHOP. Shocking for the dear Archduke—shocking.

[The Major-domo returns with his lackeys and ushers in the Prime Minister, a fat little man in morning clothes. The Major-domo and the lackeys then withdraw.]

PRIME MINISTER [*breezy*]. Morning, Archbishop; morning, Baron. The train was not on time. You must excuse me if I am a little dishevelled. I shaved in the private bathroom of a *train-de-luxe*. I know of nothing more primitive in all the world. Ah, Mr Chamberlain, this is a sad meeting. Archbishop, the Lord works in a mysterious way.

ARCHBISHOP. I understand it was a horse and not the Deity who is to blame.

PRIME MINISTER [*eyeing him, uncertain*]. Well—er—yes. [*Turning to Chamberlain*] Has the new King been informed?

CHAMBERLAIN. He is here.

PRIME MINISTER [*amazed*]. Here? Splendid! Then we can see the King this morning. Bring him in. Bring him in.

ARCHBISHOP. I think, if I may say so, Mr Prime Minister, we should meet his Majesty with something of diffidence and solicitude. He is no doubt not a little distraught. Besides, I don't think we can assume at this stage that he is going to allow us to treat him as successive Ministers have lately and regularly treated his august grandfather—by ordering lackeys to “bring him in.”

~~PRIME MINISTER. I—I—~~

an over-businesslike manner, your Grace. I imagine that neither his Majesty's nor the Baron's time is unlimited.

ARCHBISHOP. Oh, please forgive a humble priest. My appointment to the archbishopric is sufficiently green for me to be nervous and scared at this morning's duty.

PRIME MINISTER. Oh, you'll get used to it. Don't forget he is a boy of twenty-one. He has been brought up on a farm in Africa and is quite raw.

ARCHBISHOP. H'm. That is what is going to make it the more difficult. The newspapers describe him in glowing tributes as "modest and retiring." I have a suspicion that means *gauche* and awkward. Since I suffer from both those defects myself, I shan't know what to say or do, and if his Majesty doesn't it'll be awful.

[He moves to one of the chairs at the table.]

PRIME MINISTER. My dear fellah, why not take courage by the fact that he is going to be frightened to death of us?

ARCHBISHOP *[turning, standing by the chair]*. We all ought to be frightened to death this morning, Mr Prime Minister—not merely of being rulers ourselves, but also of crowning one.

CHAMBERLAIN. Very true, your Grace. *[A strained pause.]*

PRIME MINISTER *[impatient]*. Well?

CHAMBERLAIN *[to Archbishop]*. Won't you sit down, sir? *[To Prime Minister]* Mr Prime Minister? *[They sit.]* I have planned—that is to say, I thought—that this should not be merely a presentation. I thought—it is subject to your approval, sir, as the Government—that you might make this an occasion for a gesture. As his Majesty's chief adviser, would it not be nice for you at once, upon kneeling at his feet, to offer a piece of counsel unconnected directly with politics, but extremely appropriate to the King himself?

PRIME MINISTER. Oh, what's that?

CHAMBERLAIN. An exercise of the prerogative—the prerogative of mercy. Surely mercy crowns a King?

PRIME MINISTER [*sparkling*]. Yes, yes! *That* sounds all right.

ARCHBISHOP. Letting out the prisoners or something?

CHAMBERLAIN. One has to consider the safety of the State. I don't suggest letting out more than one.

PRIME MINISTER. One?

ARCHBISHOP. Will not the selection be a little invidious?

CHAMBERLAIN. Well, I will give you the same choice as was presented to a certain Governor of Judea and his advisers—a thief or a prophet.

PRIME MINISTER. Prophet?

CHAMBERLAIN. I place him as high. But the late King and his advisers honoured him, before his downfall, as a man of deep knowledge and wisdom, a man of great spirit, a pioneer, a benefactor.

PRIME MINISTER. In gaol? In one of *our* gaols? Impossible!

CHAMBERLAIN. Alas! All things are possible, sir. This, I will grant you, is shameful.

PRIME MINISTER. I should *think* so. I'll bet it was before *I* took office.

CHAMBERLAIN. The verdict against him dates before any of us took office, before our kingdom itself was founded. It dates from the primal ignorance, superstition, and stupidity of mankind.

PRIME MINISTER. That's a comfort. ~~You~~ You quite began to disturb me. Now, our Party is particularly careful always to follow——

ARCHBISHOP [*out of patience*]. Tell me, Baron, who is this—er—delinquent?

CHAMBERLAIN. Not a delinquent from corruption or vice.

He was punished for being a scientist, and is in prison for being a scientist.

ARCHBISHOP [*disturbed*]. Now I know whom you mean.

PRIME MINISTER. *Who* does he mean?

CHAMBERLAIN. I hope to convince you that the time is ripe to advise his Majesty upon a case that brought to light questions which not only were unanswered, but have not been faced. The criminal I am pleading for once held the most exalted position in medicine. He was court physician to our monarchs. He assisted in bringing the present sovereign into the world. In a sense the King owes his life to him, and therefore his reign. That is why I think it is appropriate——

PRIME MINISTER [*realizing, and startled*]. No, no, no, no. Please, Mr Chamberlain! I didn't think you were going to refer to that.

ARCHBISHOP. Yes, Baron. Is it really necessary to rake that up?

CHAMBERLAIN. Rake it up? Does your Grace think it is forgotten—disposed of?

ARCHBISHOP. His sentence was commuted.

CHAMBERLAIN [*contemptuously*]. To life! My God! The brain of a genius! Was that a lesser crime than to have hanged him?

PRIME MINISTER. He was a fanatic. He was a fanatic.

CHAMBERLAIN. Such courage in such a world as this must needs appear so. I don't mind telling you I had thought of asking the Chief Justice, who tried him, to meet you here and give you his views. He made them pretty public at the trial. But he performed a duty imposed upon him. The judges have to administer the letter of the law. But I have you here, my lord Archbishop; and you are in a position of guidance—spiritual, ultimate, final guidance.

ARCHBISHOP. I cannot discuss this.

PRIME MINISTER. Why not?

ARCHBISHOP. My dear Baron, what *has* it to do with me?

CHAMBERLAIN. With you? Everything. I am not caring for this man's life now—any more than he does. What could your miserable crumbs of freedom be to him now—even your grovelling at his feet for *his* pardon, if that were any use? It is not for one man's freedom I am asking, but for the freedom of truth.

ARCHBISHOP [*smiling*]. You could demand as much for every doctrinaire. You cannot be serious.

CHAMBERLAIN. Archbishop, was that man a murderer?

ARCHBISHOP. Dear me, dear me, that case was a most heartbreaking scandal. I must beg of you . . . My memory of the man is sufficiently reverent to wish to preserve silence on such a——

CHAMBERLAIN [*interrupting with impatience, getting up*]. Reverent! Reverent cowardice! Reverent bunkum!

PRIME MINISTER [*under his breath*]. Baron, Baron!

ARCHBISHOP. The case would not have been so unpardonable had the child been incurably diseased. Mind you, I am not admitting by that that the principle would be affected——

CHAMBERLAIN. But, your Grace, it *was* the *principle* he *wanted* to affect, he wanted to challenge. The whole case would have missed its aim if it had been one where you could have pardoned him or in any way patched up a reconciliation of two opposite—fundamentally opposite—points of view.

PRIME MINISTER. Well, that's where he did himself in, you see. I mean, he divorced public sympathy. After all, you can't go——

CHAMBERLAIN. That was his object. He didn't want public condolence. He wanted the public to face a certain question.

PRIME MINISTER. Oh, well, of course. You mean he was up the pole?

CHAMBERLAIN [*nodding*]. That, I suppose, is it. He was a practical scientist. He didn't understand public opinion. In other words, he fondly imagined it *was* an opinion, instead of being merely an emotion, and a violent, unshiftable one at that.

ARCHBISHOP. No, really, really, my dear Baron——

CHAMBERLAIN. Well, what did he do? What *could* he do? He was goaded by a stupid article in a Sunday newspaper which resulted in his book being withdrawn. He was even hauled before a magistrate for blasphemy and obscenity——

PRIME MINISTER. Our party wasn't in office. We opposed that prosecution.

ARCHBISHOP. Oh, for heaven's sake——

CHAMBERLAIN. *Nobody* could have opposed the prosecution that followed—the prosecution that followed his visit to a certain police-station of his own accord one morning some months later—the prosecution for murder—and the Archbishop and you, sir, both know it.

ARCHBISHOP. That in itself was the act of a madman.

CHAMBERLAIN [*resuming his seat*]. Quite. Think of it; he hadn't come to you with a case to arouse your sympathies, but your thought—indeed, it was a case that went to the root principle of his claims. The son of a distinguished painter had been brought into the world with an eye one inch and a half—only an inch and a half—misplaced upon the face—in the cheek. [*Suddenly clenching his teeth*] Hideous! Hideous! It was not a case of an imbecile or a cripple or venereal disease. The child would have grown up merely unutterably awful to look upon. Its father was the greatest portrait painter of the day. Irony! The King's physician attended the *accouchement*. He placed his hands

upon that child's mouth and did not allow it to breathe. And the next morning he went himself to a police-station. This latter nicely is not invariably followed in practice.

ARCHBISHOP [*turning to him shocked*]. Do you suggest that the medical profession makes this a habit?

CHAMBERLAIN. I knew a case where a nurse threatened to denounce a doctor friend of mine in similar circumstances—but such zeal, I am glad to hope, is not common.

PRIME MINISTER. Of course we know it goes on.

CHAMBERLAIN. And do you prefer that it should go on underground?

PRIME MINISTER. Yes, I think so. It is difficult to see, if you are to sanction it legally, where you are to draw the line. The father might have objected to the *colour* of the child's eyes.

CHAMBERLAIN [*smiling*]. I am assuming that the medical profession can be trusted to exclude the operation of frivolous motives even without that statutory supervision which I imagine will follow the alteration of the law as a matter of course.

ARCHBISHOP. Can we hope that the strictest legal safeguards will exclude altogether the operation of *unscrupulous* motives?

CHAMBERLAIN [*sighing*]. No, your Grace, I am afraid we can't. But I do not think *that* risk is very special to this case. In this world we are forced daily to bestow enormous responsibilities upon our fellows. Look at the judge, the priest, the statesman. Look at us now—king-makers!

ARCHBISHOP [*pondering*]. That is undoubtedly true. I am conscious of that risk myself whenever I visit my own doctor! But I should have thought that for that very reason we do not want to *increase* the responsibilities of the medical profession. How is it proposed to define the period of infancy during

•

which the divine behest "Suffer little children" is to be disregarded?

PRIME MINISTER. Yes, after all, this is a Christian country. We have no right to interfere with the work of God.

CHAMBERLAIN. Even when a child is to suffer horribly and can never take its place, in responsibility or in privilege, in the life of human society?

ARCHBISHOP [*grave*]. You are putting to our frail minds a fearful and appalling question.

PRIME MINISTER. What I have got to do is to make as much peace as I can between the legion of conflicting opinions which will inundate me if I consider the release you are suggesting. And I must confess that your suggestion that I should undertake to attempt anything of the kind fills me with dismay.

CHAMBERLAIN [*amused*]. I fully sympathize with the Prime Minister. I did not intend to burden your Excellencies with the work of a royal commission this morning; yet I believe that a much larger body of opinion than we realize is behind my own perplexity—and I do not deny that it is perplexity—upon this extremely difficult question. All I am urging is for us to accept the responsibility of reopening the question—which would ensue, I agree, from the expression of royal pardon for which I am asking—and I do appeal to you, Archbishop, to give to the matter your earnest consideration.

ARCHBISHOP [*sadly and sympathetically*]. You do not appeal in vain, I can assure you, my Lord Chamberlain. It is a matter to which I *have* given heart-searching thought, ever since that terrible trial and sentence upon a man whom I had held in high esteem. But you must appeal not to *my* poor understanding, nor to a mere human compassion, but to an Intelligence and a Mercy whose guidance in this matter I

believe to be clear and unambiguous. *I* only know that if ever this world ceases to regard the killing of a little child as a terrible thing—well, I, for one, would not answer for our fate. That state of the world which the Church dreads above all others is when faith in the wisdom and providence of God has given place to an overweening faith in the wisdom of man. I tremble to imagine what audacities and cruelties might then be perpetrated in the name of scientific experiment. You wrong me, Baron, if you think that I rejoice at the death of a sinner or have not been troubled at this doubtless sincere man's prolonged imprisonment—indeed, so much troubled, since I knew him personally, that I went into seclusion over this case. But when he persisted beyond the province of the scientist, to join contest, not in writings alone, but in dreadful deeds, in the sphere of ethics, I believed then, and I believe still, that his crime was not only murder but blasphemy, if not indeed the sin against the Holy Ghost, the denial of the providence of God. I can only do for him now what I did for him then, and what I do for you and for all your generation—pray for you.

CHAMBERLAIN [*with deep, quiet anger and despair*]. Pray! Is that all the light the Church can give us?

ARCHBISHOP [*grave*]. It is all she ever dared to pretend to give.

CHAMBERLAIN. We are asked to believe on all hands to-day that there is no real conflict between science and religion.

ARCHBISHOP. Obviously Truth is not divided against herself, but the minds of men will always be in conflict so long as they do not accept an ultimate authority.

CHAMBERLAIN. Papal infallibility!

ARCHBISHOP. Oh, no—the Source and Cause of that humble margin of guidance.

[*There is a pause. The Chamberlain sniffs, realizing*

that his by no means irresistible eloquence has encountered the immovable objection.

CHAMBERLAIN. The Church is losing ground, your Eminence.

ARCHBISHOP. She has sometimes lost boundaries, but never her foundations in the human heart.

CHAMBERLAIN [*incensed by his blandness*]. Quite. But there is fear and credulity and stupidity in the human heart. The modern world is conscious of how much those factors constitute the strength of the rock of St Peter.

ARCHBISHOP [*with passion*]. The modern world is destroying itself with vain doctrines more incredible and fearsome than the Church at her darkest ever lived to quench by the fires of her higher light. Where is to be the end if the child whose eye offends the fastidious taste of a portrait-painter is to have its precious soul plucked from its nurturing soil to be flung to the eternal unknown?

CHAMBERLAIN [*rapidly*]. Birth on this planet is cheap—sordidly, terrifyingly cheap. Visit the slums. See the children multiplied for the labour markets. Is the Church so blind that she does not know she is encouraging it?

PRIME MINISTER. Now, really, you know, I am all in favour of eugenics. Most excellent thing. But public opinion isn't ripe for it. It is not yet a practicable party issue.

ARCHBISHOP [*sighing, relapsing, and turning away*]. There are times, certainly, when I could pardon the murder of politicians.

PRIME MINISTER. Now, now, my dear Archbishop, is that fair? I am on your side.

ARCHBISHOP [*choking—exasperated*]. This fellow understands neither you nor me, Baron.

CHAMBERLAIN. You *both* understand me. That is the crime of it. But *you* hide behind your Scriptures, and *you*

hide behind your newspapers. There isn't a penn'orth to choose between either of you.

ARCHBISHOP [*with great hauteur*]. Have you done?

CHAMBERLAIN [*shrugging—bowing*]. Yes, your Grace, I have done. I can only now appeal to earthly help, to a fellow-man—to the Prime Minister.

[*The Major-domo comes in from right with the lackeys.*]

PRIME MINISTER. I—I—as I said before, if public opinion had not been so outraged by this fellow's theories I might consider even disregarding the Church——

ARCHBISHOP. Triampling upon the Church. Say it!

PRIME MINISTER. No, no, you misunderstand me.

ARCHBISHOP. Oh, what does it matter?

CHAMBERLAIN [*rising*]. Yes, Major-domo?

MAJOR-DOMO. His Majesty is ready for audience.

[*The Prime Minister jumps to his feet.*]

ARCHBISHOP [*rising*]. Good. Perhaps you will be good enough, Baron, to conduct us to the King.

CHAMBERLAIN. And you think, thereby, to escape the judgment. Very well. Please announce us, Major-domo.

[*The lackeys throw back the doors on the right. The Major-domo advances, announcing:*]

MAJOR-DOMO. His Grace the Lord Archbishop.

[*The Archbishop bows to the Prime Minister and goes to enter. But he stands stock-still as his eyes fall upon the King in the next room. He clutches his hands and casts a terrified glance at the Chamberlain. Without a word he rushes back into the ante-chamber, biting his fist and trembling.*]

ARCHBISHOP. God!

PRIME MINISTER. What's wrong? [*Looks into room.*] Ah! [*A cry of dismay.*] Baron! Baron!

CHAMBERLAIN. In to the throne—to your knees!

PRIME MINISTER [*dithering*]. What is it? My God! What is it?

ARCHBISHOP. Come away! Come away!

PRIME MINISTER [*recoiling—shielding his eyes*]. A monster! A monster!

CHAMBERLAIN. Your King! [*Hurriedly to the Major-domo*] Shut it out. [*The Major-domo retires into the throne-room, closing the doors.*] Now you know something of what drove the King's physician mad, as you call it. He saved that creature's life, and spent the remaining years of his own life trying to expiate the shame of it. Now you know why we have kept this secret, pretending that the Prince was being educated abroad. An accident to the King while hunting has brought *that* to the throne.

ARCHBISHOP. We cannot—we cannot *crown* it!

CHAMBERLAIN. We must. We may not crown anyone but the rightful heir so long as he lives—and I am advised that this thing may crawl about the floor another seventy years.

ARCHBISHOP [*sinking into a chair and burying his head in his hands*]. Oh, Christ, have mercy upon us! Oh, Lord! Oh, Lord, have mercy!

PRIME MINISTER [*falling into a chair*]. What are we going to do? My God! What are we going to do?

CHAMBERLAIN. That is what we are here to discuss—plans for the coronation. [*There is a long pause; then, speaking slowly*] Well, gentlemen, who is going to be the first to open the discussion?

[*Long pause.*]

SLOW CURTAIN

The Southern Cross

By Paul Green

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CHARACTERS

MAJOR JOHN OLIVER, *a run-down Southern
aristocrat*

CLARA, *his daughter*

KIAH, *an old negro, formerly a body-servant
to the Major*

DAVID HAYES, *Clara's aristocratic suitor*

FRED JONES, *a young man on his way to the
West*

SCENE: *The southern part of the United States.*

TIME: *Afternoon of a warm spring day in the latter part
of the nineteenth century.*

*Applications regarding amateur performances of this play should
be addressed to Messrs Samuel French, Ltd., 26 Southampton
Street, Strand, London, W.C.2, or 25 West 45th Street, New
York*

The Southern Cross

The curtain rises on the scraggly, ruined garden of Major Oliver's old Southern mansion—a side view which does not show the dwelling. Entrances at upper and lower right and upper and lower left. At the left front is a clump of boxwood shrubbery, and in the right centre a weatherworn little summer-house, with a few rose-vines growing up it and roses in early bloom. An empty rocking-chair and a garden seat are beside the summer-house. Projecting diagonally in at the right rear is the corner of an iron picket-fence. Behind it the grey squat shapes of two or three tombstones are seen. Fred Jones, a muscular young man of twenty-five or -six, dressed in neat homespun farm clothes, is sitting on the sill of the summer-house idly strumming a guitar which he holds in his lap. Presently his voice rises into accompanying song and then dies away.

FRED [*in half-distinguished words*].

I looked at my father, and my father he said,
O stay at home, my dearest son, to follow in my stead.
O stay at home and cease your fret to seek a fairer
land
Way out in Texas on the old Rio Grande.

I looked at my mother, and my mother she said,
The aching heart within my breast is weighted down
like lead;
The aching heart will break to know I'll never touch
your hand
Way out in Texas on the old Rio Grande.

[He stops and sits staring before him, then lays himself back against a post, gazing up at the rose-vines overhead. A moment passes, and Clara Oliver comes slowly in at the right rear by the cemetery fence. She carries some wild flowers in her filmy wide-brimmed hat. Stopping by the fence, she picks a few scattered daisies, then stands and stares over at the tombstones. She is a rather tall, striking young woman with a clean-cut aristocratic face, a little pensive and sad, perhaps, but beautiful. Her eyes are large and dark, and her thick dark hair, piled in a coil round her head, is fastened with a silver comb and two or three amber-coloured hairpins. She is dressed in her Sunday best—the style of the eighties—a greenish sort of crispy silk, set with a delicate lace collar. For a moment she gazes at the tombstones, then moves along the rear, breaking off a bloom here and there in the garden. Coming over to the summer-house, she begins gathering roses, climbing up on the old garden seat to do so. The seat creaks, and Fred Jones sits up quickly and moves his guitar with a bumping sound. Clara looks down a bit startled.]

CLARA *[in a low level voice that betrays no shadow of surprise]*. Am I disturbing your rest?

FRED *[springing up]*. Oh, no. *[Stretching himself a bit]* The Sunday laziness got me. I been sitting here—oh, just picking the guitar and thinking.

CLARA. I hope they were pleasant thoughts.

[She goes on plucking the roses with businesslike movements of her deft hands.]

FRED. Well—yes, depending on how you look at it. Can I help you gather the roses?

CLARA. No, thank you. I'd rather you played something. I see you have the guitar.

FRED [*after a moment*]. Well—and then maybe I'll want to ask you a question. [*He looks over at her, then stands turning the guitar in his hands.*] That's a good guitar you've got. I appreciate your letting me play it while I've been here.

CLARA [*after another pause*]. I told you last night it was yours. I wouldn't know one chord from another now. You keep it.

FRED [*with a smile*]. Then I suppose I would be a real tiamp. And I could stop in towns, play a bit, and now and then take up a collection. Please, sir, mister, just a copper. No, you'd better keep it. Some day you might want to play it again. Where I'm going to it's muscle power and not music that's needed.

CLARA [*sitting down in the rocking-chair and beginning to arrange the flowers from the hat*]. You haven't maybe—been thinking about it all—all differently since last night?

FRED. Differently how?

CLARA. I—I thought—— [*Her voice fades away and then rises again.*] About going on to Texas—I thought maybe you'd give up the idea.

FRED. Good gracious! [*With an abrupt laugh*] I suppose it does look like that. Here I've been camped about your house for three days—only fifty miles from home—eating and——

CLARA [*interrupting*]. But look at the work you've done! Fixed the fences, mended the barn doors. [*With a gesture of her hand behind her*] Mowed the weeds out of the garden, cut the grass on the lawn, and already made everything look—look nicer, much nicer.

FRED. Pshaw, that's nothing. I'd like to do a thousand times more. [*Turning and looking at her*] Yeh, it must seem mighty queer to you that a stranger like me should stop in from a thunderstorm for an hour and stay three days. This is the fourth.

CLARA. No, it doesn't at all.

FRED. There's a reason I haven'—haven't gone on any farther, Miss Clara. You know that.

[*He stops and looks at her.*]

CLARA [*without looking up*]. Towards Texas?

FRED. Yes, towards Texas. And I was to meet some other fellows at the railroad. They've gone. I'm still here.

CLARA [*murmuring*]. Lots of people are going to Texas now, aren't there?

FRED. Lots and lots of them—going out, taking a new start, beginning all over again. [*Sweeping the guitar with his hand*] I've told you that already.

CLARA. Only once.

FRED. Yes, all going on, and I'm not gone. Here's my money in my pocket. It's only twenty miles more to the railroad. You must have thought— Oh, of course I don't mean that you've been specially thinking about it, but it must have crossed your mind that—well, that if I've really got a piece of Government land waiting out there, I ought to be going on to settle it.

CLARA. Maybe you won't want to settle on that land. Maybe you might stay on here. [*Hurriedly as he is about to speak*] You've said yourself that we need somebody mighty bad to work here, to take care of things.

[*Her voice dies out again, and she sits gripping the flowers in her hand.*]

FRED. You need somebody, all right—everything's going to rack and ruin.

CLARA. We wouldn't have much to pay you with at first. But maybe——

FRED [*a cold note suddenly in his voice*]. But maybe I could get along—yes?

CLARA. Yes.

FRED [*vehemently*]. Yes, as a hired man. That's what I'm leaving from, I tell you. [*Gesturing behind him*] Back there I was a hireling. It was one day's work after another, all for the other man. That's why I'm going to Texas—going, I tell you, where I can be something, a free man, a man with a future, with something ahead, something big. Up in them hills ploughing in the burning summer, cutting the man's timber in the freezing winter, driving, driving, at the word of command, moving when he said move, stopping when his whistle blew—seemed like some time my mind would break all to pieces. I weren't made for a slave. Something in my heart kept pushing me up and on—myself, me, on to freedom. Back there the name of Jones is common as gully dirt, but some day in Texas it'll have a meaning.

CLARA. Yes, I'm sure of it——

FRED. Are you?

CLARA. Yes, you'll do great things out there, Fred.

FRED [*almost sharply*]. Then why do you tell me to stay here?

CLARA. Oh—then I shouldn't. I'm sorry.

FRED [*fiercely, half to himself*]. No, it's the other way round. Why have I stayed here as long as I have? What keeps me here?

[*He sits looking at Clara, but she never raises her eyes.*]

CLARA [*presently*]. Then you'll be going soon.

FRED. Soon, soon, I tell you—maybe to-day. [*For a moment they sit in silence. Fred watches her hands working the*

flowers into little bouquets.] They're purty flowers. What are they for?

CLARA. For the exercises. [*Looking up at the sun*] It's almost time for the folks to be here.

FRED [*abstractedly*]. What exercises?

CLARA. It's Memorial Day, and we're having a little ceremony there in the burial-ground. We always do—every year.

FRED. Hum, like a poem I once read in a schoolbook.

CLARA [*softly*]. How sleep the brave, who sink to rest—

FRED. Yes, that's the one I learned. What sort of ceremony do you have?

CLARA. Very simple. Father says a few words, and I'll lay these flowers down for remembrance.

FRED. Of the dead?

CLARA. Of the dead—our people.

FRED. It sounds sad enough.

CLARA. We're proud to do it.

FRED. Yes, that's just it—

CLARA. What?

FRED. Oh, nothing. Will you have a big crowd?

CLARA [*with a little low laugh*]. There's Father and Uncle Kiah and myself. And Mr David is coming.

FRED. Mr David—yes, he said so the other night when he was here.

CLARA. Since we were children together he has never missed the day.

FRED. He's got a good reason.

CLARA [*ignoring his remark*]. And you're invited—that'll make five.

FRED. Thank you.

CLARA. You're welcome.

[*With an irritated movement Fred picks up the guitar and strums it, then begins singing.*]

FRED.

I looked at my sister, and my sister she said,
O brother mine, you'd leave your home, your fire-
side, and your bed,
O brother mine, but not your love for any foreign
strand

Way out in Texas on the old Rio Grande.

I looked at my lover, and my lover she said,
Though bitter were the road we go, the suffering on
ahead,

Though bitter be the road to death, with you I'd
take my stand

Way out in Texas on the old Rio Grande.

CLARA [*after a moment*]. That's nice—the way you sing it.

FRED. And I had a question to ask. [*As she says nothing*]
Do you think a woman would do that? [*Clara makes no
answer.*] Suppose there was some one, would she go with
me—I mean with him—with the man?

CLARA. What do you think?

FRED. I'm asking you, Miss Clara.

CLARA [*after a moment, looking up*]. Maybe she couldn't
go, Fred.

FRED [*fiercely*]. But she would if she loved him. [*In sudden
alarm as he stares at her hand*] Look, your hand is bleeding.

[*He fumbles in his pockets, finally pulls out a hand-
kerchief, and comes over towards her.*]

CLARA [*her hand going out and taking the handkerchief
quickly*]. It's nothing—one of the thorns. [*She wraps up her
finger.*] I'm—I'm ruining your handkerchief.

FRED [*spontaneously*]. Oh—Miss Clara—I—— [*Help-
lessly*] But I can't talk to you. Sitting here last night I could.
Now to-day you seem so—so far off——

[He turns and grips one of the posts with his two hands, making the little summer-house shiver violently.]

CLARA. You'll shake it down if you don't mind.

FRED. That's what I feel like doing—tear it down—*[gesturing around him]* tear it all down—that's the truth—save you from it all—this rot, this death.

CLARA *[in deep agitation]*. You mustn't talk like that any more. You promised.

[Fred drops his hands from the post and stands looking off.]

[Major John Oliver enters lower left. He is a dilapidated, raw-boned man of some sixty-five or more, with a tangle of iron-grey hair, deep-set fox-red eyes, a high, hooked, aristocratic nose, and a clean-shaven face except for a short military moustache. He is dressed in a spotless white shirt, dark trousers, and carpet slippers. He walks with the aid of a cane and carries a little book in his hand. Clara rises.]

MAJOR *[in a quavery, punctilious voice]*. It's warmer than I thought out here. I forgot my fan, Clara.

CLARA *[as the Major sinks wearily into the rocking-chair]*. I'll get it.

MAJOR *[blowing out his breath]*. Another hot summer, another hot summer coming on. Please lay out my uniform too, Clara.

CLARA. And the sabre also?

MAJOR *[staring at her]*. And my arms as usual. And then I want you to come back and finish that chapter in my phrenology book.

CLARA. Yes, Father.

[She goes away at the lower left, and the Major sits with the book open before him. Fred still stands looking off before him, holding the guitar by the

neck. The Major gives him a piercing look out of his deep-set eyes and then tremblingly puts on a pair of spectacles and stares at the book.

MAJOR [*now looking over at Fred again*]. Phrenology is a great science, my friend. Know anything about it?

FRED. No, sir, Major Oliver, I don't.

MAJOR. Through cranial markings the powers and constituents of both the character and the soul are known. [*Feeling the top of his once lordly head*] Here, for instance, between the bump of wisdom and the bump of unselfishness, lies another bump, largely developed. Do you know what that might be? [*Fred shakes his head and stares round at the Major.*] Why, the bump of survival. A virtue and a power long possessed by the race of Olivers. [*Closing his book and slowly taking off his spectacles*] I should like the privilege of a few words with you, sir.

FRED [*quietly*]. All right, sir.

MAJOR [*lifting a long, clawlike hand in the air*]. You will indulge me—an old man [*wheezing*] and a very sick one. [*Fred lowers his head.*] It might interest you to know that for more than a hundred years this mansion [*with a slight gesture towards the left*—a mansion known in story and song as the birthplace of statesmen and gallant soldiers—this mansion has long been famous for its hospitality. That being true, you must know it has grieved me no little that you, our latest visitor, have had to sleep in the barn.

FRED. You couldn't hardly call me a visitor, Major. I just stopped in out of the rain.

MAJOR [*almost gently*]. And the rain has been over for three days, sir. [*His old, desolate voice now filling with a sterner, harder note*] However, though you claim to be nothing but a casual caller and a stranger, your behaviour the last few days argues differently for the future. You understand me?

FRED. No, sir, I don't.

MAJOR. Then in plainer words, my hospitality is being put to quite a strain so far as you are concerned. [*Quickly*] Pardon my crudeness in expressing myself. Perhaps you could state it better because of your experience as a tramp on the roads.

FRED. I'm not a tramp on the roads.

MAJOR. We will not debate that subtle point.

FRED. I reckon I understand what you are driving at.

MAJOR. Then very good, and there is no need to pursue the subject further.

FRED. Yes, but there is. I want to say something.

MAJOR [*picking up his book*]. Oh, please don't apologize, for—again to speak bluntly and with pain—we haven't begrudged you your food, young man. For, like the Samaritan in the Scriptures, we have never turned anyone away from our door empty-handed, though now, owing to the irony told of in the briefs and chronicles of history which has allowed us to be plundered by our Northern enemies, our store of goods is sorely depleted. [*With sudden and harsh brutality*] And now that we understand each other I bid you farewell and godspeed. [*With biting sarcasm*] The grass-grown plains of Texas are calling you to come and help build a new and mighty commonwealth. You a budding statesman. And so I bid you good-bye—not to-day, not to-morrow, nor next day, but now.

FRED. I take that to mean you are ordering me off your premises, as the lawyers say.

MAJOR. You catch my intent perfectly. I am.

FRED. All right, I'm going, but not before I talk to you and Miss Clara——

MAJOR. If you persist in using my daughter's name familiarly I'll be driven to the necessity of getting my horse pistol from its velvet case and shooting you down like a dog.

FRED [*angrily*]. No, that you won't.

MAJOR. Yes, but I will. In defence of my daughter's honour—no—white trash——

FRED. I'm not afraid of you or your name, Major Oliver. Maybe I am what you call poor white trash. Maybe my folks never lived in a great mansion like yours. We never owned negroes and fast horses and ate the fat of the land and walked in fancy silks and laces and wallowed in the lap of love the way you did. No, we didn't. But we fought the Civil War and died at Manassas and Gettysburg and Seven Pines just the same as you. My father was killed at Cold Harbour—and he didn't know what he died for either.

MAJOR [*lifting his cane*]. No more of your fine words, hear me! I've had enough these last few days.

FRED [*bitterly*]. The proud Olivers! But look at your daughter. She milks the cow, feeds the pigs, does the work of a negro. Here in poverty you sit, grinding out her life. What chance is there for her here in this godforsaken place? I tell you——

[*He looks off at the left, and suddenly stops as Clara comes in with a palm-leaf fan which she hands to the Major. She also carries a book under her arm.*]

MAJOR [*with gentle dignity*]. Thank you, my child. [*Cocking his head and listening*] I hear old Tom whinnying down at the barn. [*With a look up at the sun*] Time to feed him.

CLARA [*to Fred*]. Will you please attend to him, Fred?

FRED [*conscious of the tone of her voice*]. I'll 'tend to him, Miss Clara, this last time.

CLARA [*in the same level voice*]. Thank you. I pulled some grass for him. It's in the harness-room. Get it. [*As Fred starts away*] He should have water too.

FRED [*in the tone of a menial*]. Yes, ma'am, Miss Clara.

[He goes quickly out at the lower right. Clara stands looking after him. The Major observes her out of the corner of his eye for a moment.]

MAJOR. Sit down, Clara.

CLARA *[as if suddenly waking up]*. How're you feeling to-day, Father? *[Turning and then looking at him as he gazes back at her]* Did you sleep well?

MAJOR. Oh—yes—well. *[Changing his tone with an effort]* I've just got up.

CLARA. Then you've had a long rest. I tried to keep quiet and not wake you.

MAJOR. I was already awake at daybreak and heard you tiptoeing about the house—at daybreak and it Sunday, Clara. *[A testy, querulous note in his voice]* So you went to church this morning?

CLARA *[her deep, throaty voice as always gentle and unhurried]*. Yes.

MAJOR. Did they all gather around you and pray for you and for my sinful soul?

CLARA. No, Father. *[Turning towards the Major]* Can I fetch you a glass of water?

MAJOR. No, thankee. And who was there—at the church?

CLARA. A lot of people.

MAJOR. Strange people?

CLARA. Yes, to me they were.

MAJOR. Aye. *[Muttering]* Every time you turn around there's another poor white born. They breed like flies. Like the locusts of Egypt they swarm over the world.

CLARA. I hardly knew anybody—neither the young nor the old.

MAJOR *[with a chuckle]*. Now they'll have something to tell their children—how the proud lady came down out of her ivory tower and went searching for—well, for what?

CLARA. Oh, I was out walking and stopped in. When the singing began I slipped off and came back home through the woods. I didn't stay.

MAJOR. You didn't?

CLARA. No, Father. [*Musing*] Everything was so green and lovely.

MAJOR. At the church?

CLARA. In the woods.

MAJOR [*a light, jeering note in his voice*]. Green and beautiful and the birds were singing there.

CLARA. Yes. [*Simply*] And two squirrels were playing in the top of a pine-tree, and I watched them.

MAJOR. Did you see Sir Galahad come riding through the forest—his heart full of poetry, his face——

CLARA. No, Father.

MAJOR. No, Father—yes, Father! [*Gasping*] Lord ha' mercy, Clara!

CLARA. I guess it was just a whim—my going.

MAJOR. People have whims when they are—hum! . . . Maybe that's why I have my tantrums—just to keep myself company, eh, Clara? There are a lot of queer dark things down inside of a human being, ain't they?

CLARA [*lifting her dark eyes and studying her father's face*]. Maybe, Father.

MAJOR. Maybe! [*Loudly*] You—yes, how should you know? [*Staring at her and then as if suddenly reciting*] Over there somewhere in the darkness things shape themselves and come to their appointed season. [*Striking the arm of the chair with his fist*] But the proud shall keep their pride till the crack of doom, eh, Clara? Ha, ha, ha. [*Jerking his head up*] Was Henry Tompkins at church?

CLARA. Yes, he was there.

MAJOR. And I bet he fell out of his seat when he saw you.

[*With a bitter laugh*] A deacon and a holy man with money in the bank and—and a mortgage on all this. [*He sweeps his lean arm inclusively over the scene.*] Rot his soul! He used to be sweet on you, Clara. When we'd drive into town and buy something at his store he'd fasten his eyes on you. And he'd been a bound boy to my father! But when I got through telling him where his place was I reckon he took his eyes off you. Oh, yes, he did, didn't he? [*As Clara says nothing*] I say, didn't he?

CLARA [*softly*]. Yes. [*Lifting her eyes*] Is it true he's rich now?

MAJOR [*vehemently*]. And with a fat wife! Ha, ha, ha. She revenges us on him. [*His face is suddenly caught in a grimace of pain as he groans and rubs his bad leg.*] That leg seems like a piece of wood. Wish sometimes I could take my pocket-knife and cut the thing off.

CLARA [*half rising*]. Can I get you a poultice?

MAJOR [*sharply*]. It never does any good. [*After a moment*] Go ahead and read me my book now.

CLARA [*sitting down and opening a thick volume*]. I thought you'd maybe like this.

MAJOR [*looking over at her*]. Not if it's one of Scott's novels—no, you needn't read it.

CLARA. Yes, but you'd like it—you would this one. It tells about a lady and a——

MAJOR. No, I wouldn't like it. That's one thing wrong with you, Clara, reading so much trash about romantic people that never lived. Quit it—hum! . . . Your grandfather went back to Scotland once to see the old castle that belonged to our family. A great party was given for him, and Walter Scott was there.

CLARA [*opening the phrenology book*]. Yes, I know. It's mentioned in Grandfather's diary.

MAJOR. But you don't know what Scott told your grandfather. That's not mentioned.

CLARA [*with sudden interest*]. No. What was it?

MAJOR [*cackling*]. He said, "Colonel Oliver, there never were such characters as those I write about. But people are full of dreams and strange fancies and so they like to think there were." That story of the high-born lady and the low-born man ain't true, you see. No, you needn't read it.

CLARA [*with sudden directness*]. Why are you talking to me like this, Father?

MAJOR. Oh, just for some reason—no matter. Anyway, I've heard your grandfather tell it more than once.

CLARA [*lifting the book and suddenly beginning to read in a childlike half-literate way*]. "Dr. Vermont thinks that the space between philo—philoprogenitiveness and self-esteem includes two organs."

MAJOR [*grunting*]. Greed, he means—thievery!

CLARA [*staring at him an instant and then continuing*]. "The lower of these organs I found large in certain birds of prey——"

MAJOR. Yeh, and it shows in the shape of their head.

CLARA. "Using this as a basis, I compared my findings with certain human characteristics of the lower classes in the South, especially the poor whites——"

MAJOR. Who says that man don't know what he's talking about? [*Leaning towards Clara*] These people think the hand that turns the great wheel—like the Greeks—it's bearing them up—up—and us down. Fools!

CLARA [*reading, the pitch of her voice a bit higher*]. "In boys this organ frequently indicates itself in attachment to dogs, horses, rabbits, birds, and other animals. In girls it shows itself by affectionate embraces of the doll."

MAJOR [*muttering in recitation again*]. There's a dark army

rising in the west. Yes, let the white and shining soldiers assemble on the plain with their lightning and their brimstone. They'll be needed.

CLARA [*smiling*]. You sound like the Book of Revelation, Father.

MAJOR. I, John, on the Isle of Patmos, I dream my dream. And, lying in my bed at night, I hear the doodles singing under the sills, with their dry traps set for the unwary ants, and you and me two spits of white bait in the deadfall of death. That's what they say—ha, ha, ha—but we'll fool 'em, won't we, Clara? Fool both the doodles and the white trash.

CLARA [*turning and laying her hand gently on her father's arm*]. For goodness' sakes, Father.

MAJOR [*as she leans towards him*]. I always like it—hum—that custom of putting lavender among folded clothes; it should never die out.

CLARA. No, it shouldn't.

MAJOR. And it won't as long as you live, I know it won't. [*Looking off at the left*] There comes David now. [*Half gasping*] Listen, Clara, I can't last much longer, you know that. 'Most any time now the doctor says. 'Most any time, and I'll be gone. [*Clara makes a gesture to interrupt him, but he hurries on*] To-morrow's your birthday. You'll be twenty-six. It's about David I want to talk with you. About David.

CLARA [*in a low voice*]. Please, Father.

MAJOR. Ten years he's been coming here—ten years. There's nobody else for you, Clara—nobody but David. Through him our line will continue. . . . Listen, child, listen to me; you promised him—promised his father the General before he died—you've promised me. Why do you keep waiting, waiting—why?

CLARA. Please, Father.

MAJOR [*trying to control his feelings*]. Yes, please, please, please, Father. Something has come over you lately, Clara—I—

[*David Hayes comes in from the lower left. He is an unimpressive young man of about thirty, somewhat slender and effeminate, and dressed in the neat but poor best of his times. His collar, high up under his chin, is set off with a thick black bow tie, and the lapel of his well-worn broad-cloth coat is adorned with a dead rosebud. His manner is quiet and hesitating, and his hands are as thin and delicate as a woman's.*]

DAVID [*with his dark soft hat primly in his hand*]. Good morning, Clara.

CLARA [*as always with him*]. Good morning, David.

DAVID. And how're you feeling, Major?

MAJOR. Oh, I'll live to be a hundred. You been keeping well, David?

DAVID. Yes, sir; same as usual. Fine day for the exercises.

MAJOR. Perfect. Heaven sends its benediction.

DAVID. It does. [*Feeling in his pocket*] Here are the flags, Clara.

CLARA. What flags, David? [*As David gives her a perplexed glance*] Oh, the memorial flags. Thank you.

DAVID. Yes, the memorial flags. Would you think I'd forget?

[*He pulls out a paper parcel and reveals a few tiny Confederate flags and hands them to her.*]

MAJOR [*helping himself up to a standing position*]. I'll go in now and get dressed.

CLARA [*rising also*]. I'll help you, Father.

MAJOR. No, no, you children stay and chat. I'm sure David wants to talk with you, Clara. [*Moving away at the*

left and beginning to quote oratorically towards his coming speech]
In me you see the last syllable of recorded time. But still I can go under my own power. [*Murmuring*] Strew on them roses, roses, and never a spray of yew—— [*He goes on out.*]

DAVID [*after a moment in a low voice*]. He's getting feeble, Clara. [*Clara makes no reply, but stands looking at the ground.*]

CLARA [*suddenly in an agitated voice*]. Yes. I try not to notice it, but he is.

[*She shakes her head as if warding off an unpleasant thought and then sinks down into the rocking-chair. David takes his seat on the garden bench, holding his hat quietly in his hand.*]

DAVID [*presently*]. I want to talk to you, Clara.

CLARA [*with a nervous start of her hands*]. Not to-day—ah—later we'll talk.

DAVID. Why, you don't even know what I'm going to say.

CLARA [*swiftly*]. Yes, I do. Father's already talked to me—I—that is, he tried to.

DAVID. What did he say?

CLARA. Well, many things. [*Lifting her deep, troubled eyes*] You know what it would be.

DAVID. About me—me and you? [*She bows her head.*] Then it makes it easier for me to talk.

CLARA. Please, David——

DAVID [*his shyness and hesitating manner now revealing a doggedness of purpose we might not have suspected*]. No, I've got to say it. [*After a pause*] Your father wrote me a letter yesterday.

CLARA [*gazing at the flags in her hands*]. That's strange.

DAVID. It's not strange, not now. And we've got to settle something soon—Clara.

CLARA [*agitated*]. Perhaps next week or the next—perhaps——

DAVID [*shaking his head*]. We've been engaged a long time, Clara, and——

CLARA [*trying to control her voice*]. I know how you feel, David—know how Father feels. But—oh, I've got to tell you. I can't do it—no, I can't.

DAVID [*still kindly and persistently*]. Can't do what, Clara?

CLARA. Oh, David, let's wait a while—another year. [*Bending towards him, a pleading, vehement note in her voice*] Listen, I've been thinking a lot lately, and I'm beginning to see things in a way I never have before.

DAVID. What way, Clara?

CLARA. I mean, I'm beginning to see maybe how wrong we've been.

DAVID [*always gentle and calm*]. Wrong about what, honey?

CLARA. Our ideas—yours—mine—Father's—all of us. Maybe we've got the wrong point of view about life——

[*She suddenly stops as old Kiah comes feeling his way into the yard at the lower right, poking his stick out in little inquiring pecks as he walks. He is a wrinkled, ebony-black little negro of seventy or more in whom is concentrated all the dignity of speech and manner belonging to the ancient race of Olivers. He is dressed in the faded uniform of a Confederate private, cap, belt, and all. Although he is nearly blind he knows his way about perfectly inside the house and out.*]

KIAH [*touching his cap in a stiff salute and speaking as if into the air*]. Excuse me for coming to the garden. I heard you all talking.

CLARA. Morning, Uncle Kiah.

KIAH [*saluting again*]. Morning, little missy. Might have knowed it was you out here in the bright sunlight. Is your flowers fine?

CLARA. Yes, Uncle Kiah.

KIAH. Ole missus used to like flowers—flowers—she was a flower herself. Like—like a jonquil by the river bank. Her hair was yellow as gold—flowers in a field. You are just like her, little missy, ain't you?

CLARA. My hair is dark, Uncle Kiah.

KIAH. Yes'm. And is that Mr David there with you, little missy?

DAVID. Yes, Uncle Kiah.

KIAH. God bless you, suh—the old General's boy!

THE MAJOR'S VOICE [*from off at the left*]. Come on in the house, Kiah!

KIAH [*with another sharp salute*]. Private Oliver reports for the exercises, Major.

THE MAJOR'S VOICE. At ease.

[*Kiah relaxes his stiff attitude and goes on off at the lower left. Clara and David watch him go.*]

DAVID. There, Clara—faithful to the end. If we only could stand true like him. [*With genuine feeling*] And we must.

CLARA [*shaking her head and then turning impulsively towards him*]. Listen, David—I'm not—not—— Oh, you must know what I mean. It's this—I'm not the woman for you.

DAVID [*apparently not too much taken aback*]. I remember hearing you say that too—once you did.

CLARA [*abruptly*]. There are plenty of women over in town you could—marry.

DAVID [*staring at her*]. For heaven's sake! [*Warmly*] Don't you suppose I have some pride? Yes, I'm proud of my father's name, just as proud as you are. And that's one reason I've always loved you and not some other person with no—— [*Throwing out his hands*] You understand what I mean.

CLARA. You mean some other woman who is not good enough for you.

DAVID. Yes, if you want to put it that way. Yes, that's what I mean.

CLARA. Listen, David. I've learned something, and the quicker you learn it the better. We can't live the way we do—off from other people and have any peace and life and get anywhere. [*Sharply*] Why don't you go into town and get you a job? Yes, become a clerk in the store—anything, but do something to make a living?

DAVID [*defensively*]. I guess I don't beg from anybody.

CLARA. No, you do worse than that. You've mortgaged away the last acre of the old General Hayes estate and lived on it for the last fifteen years. Just the way Father has.

DAVID [*staring at her*]. What has come over you, Clara?

CLARA. I told you I'd been thinking. And I see we've been going under in the fight. We haven't been facing the facts.

DAVID. What fight—what facts?

CLARA. Life. Existence.

DAVID. We are not going under in the fight. Didn't everything look hopeless when the carpet-baggers were down here? But we run 'em out. Didn't the niggers try to cut up, and didn't our Ku Klux put them in their places? Yes, we're not down and out, not by a long shot. And we'll get the best of these poor whites yet——

CLARA [*more quietly now*]. Maybe it's the same with nations and states as it is with people. We talk of the old South. It's dead—dead in its tracks, and the Civil War killed it. But we've never acknowledged it's dead. And why? Because we can't forget its past. We can't forget what it once did or was supposed to have done. And you and I will never amount to anything till we've turned our backs on our history and set our faces to the future, to work and plan, to build things the way people out in—in Texas are doing. Look at Charleston

—just like a coffin. It is, David. That time I visited Cousin DuBose Hampton down there——

DAVID. And what things are you talking about building?

CLARA. Roads, schools, hospitals, cities, great farms——

DAVID [*his voice cold and almost sharp*]. You must think my memory's mighty short, Clara. Night before last I sat right here and heard that good-for-nothing Jones fellow dealing out the same sort of talk to the Major. Talk, talk, nothing but talk, and he's still hanging around here, too trifling to go on wherever he's supposed to go. Yes, such folks can run their tongues all right, but nothing else. And if the South is dead now as you say it is it's because the kind of people like this Fred Jones and Henry Tompkins have got control of things. But it's not dead, I tell you.

CLARA. That's right, they've got control, and you know why?

DAVID. By crookedness and meanness and cunning, that's why! Swapping, trading, hunting for the almighty dollar—cutting down the forests, building cheap houses, gutting and slaughtering the land—money, money.

CLARA [*shaking her head firmly*]. No, because of their belief in the future. We believe in the past.

DAVID [*triumphantly*]. But you'll never believe in their future—you and I won't—their future of ugliness and ignorance and low taste. [*Pleadingly*] I love you, Clara. I've always loved you, always will. It may be ten years I've been coming here. All right, I'll keep coming ten more. You say you've been thinking. So have I. You'd try to break me down with arguments, wouldn't you? But you can't. [*Now half angrily*] I can meet you, argument for argument, point for point. And I will go on and on being myself to the end, and so will you be, you and I, for we are alike. We are the old south. In us lives the heritage of grace, of culture. It is

our duty to keep it to the last, though we starve. And we belong to each other. We can't escape being what we are. And we can't escape our duty. Though it be a cross we still would have to bear it.

CLARA [*staring out across the scene*]. Sometimes I think you don't really love me, David. No, maybe you've never loved anybody. You love nothing but your—but your pride and what it stood for, your people, our people—their dead symbols [*gesturing towards the right*]*—the way I've loved—loved them out there in their graves.* [*Her voice rising again*] Why, you can read in the papers—see pictures in the papers—of old mansions all up and down the South, in Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia—everywhere, that are rotting away in decay. Negroes are living in some of them, and in others nothing but the bats and the owls. [*Gesturing to the left*] And some day negroes will live in this house just as they will in your father's house, and then some day a fire will burn it down, and then the axes of Henry Tompkins' tenants will be laid to the trees. And the fields will take them in, and corn and cotton will grow where once they stood. That's the truth, David. [*Her voice rising more vehemently*] All these years I've been working here, working and slaving to keep our heads above water. Day after day hearing Father pour out his hopeless, bitter grieving, and at night lying awake, lonely, lonely, and everywhere around me feeling the slow rotting of life, the dull thud of the dead limbs falling out of the trees. Everything dissolving, failing, giving way. [*Her voice almost a cry*] And I want to live—live—somewhere—somehow I do.

DAVID. These are fine words and fancies from a beggar. [*Sadly*] Well, it's a cheap thing to do, Clara, and not like you at all. And the Major's noticed it, but he's too proud to talk to you the way I'm having to. It would kill him to hear you

now.... Pride? All right, I am proud. And I'll keep my pride. I won't go around hobnobbing with riffraff and licking the shoes of people that come pushing their way up in the world. No, I won't. Let them swirl up around me. But I'll keep my head above them and help you to keep yours. [*Smiling at her warmly*] That's how much I love you.

CLARA [*presently*]. So together you and Father would keep your power over me?

DAVID. Yes, if you put it that way.

CLARA. And I'm a prisoner, as it were?

DAVID. No, we are only protecting you, as all true men protect the women they love.

CLARA [*her voice almost a cry*]. I ought to—if I only had the strength to go away! [*Pleadingly*] Help me, David.

DAVID. But you'll never go away. Not with—with this or any other man. Never. I know you, Clara, and you can't break away. Something holds you here as strong as life.

CLARA. Strong as death. [*Almost whispering*] It is death.

[*Suddenly the air is rent by the Major's voice in a sharp command off at the left.*]

THE MAJOR'S VOICE. Attention!

CLARA [*springing up instinctively*]. The flowers——

DAVID. See, that's it—that's it. You jumped to your feet—everything else forgot in your duty. Ah, Clara, you can't fool yourself, a self that belongs with its every heartbeat to your past, our past, and to our families. And that's what you'll do, Clara—remain true to them. Like your mother, my mother, and all the great and noble women who have stood untouched by defeat and despair, you will never shirk, you will never—— [*Fred enters at the lower right.*]

CLARA [*in deep agitation*]. Stop—please stop it, I tell you! I can't——

[*Her voice dies away as she sees Fred coming towards them.*]

FRED [*stopping in front of her and staring at David*]. No, she won't shirk anything—will you, Miss Clara?

DAVID [*with lofty and crushing coldness*]. You are not concerned in this.

FRED. She can decide that.

DAVID. You can't possibly understand what we——

FRED [*sharply*]. I guess I do. But you can't—you with your eyes blinded and your pride high up to heaven.

DAVID [*loudly*]. We excuse you, young man. Leave us alone.

FRED [*boldly*]. Not yet you won't excuse me. [*Turning to Clara as David looks on in amazement*] And there's no use waiting any longer to decide things. [*Clara's hand goes out in a strange fumbling gesture and then drops to her side.*] You already know that. And all the things we've talked about these few days—you know them—you remember.

CLARA [*in an almost indistinct voice*]. I remember.

DAVID [*starting forward*]. Clara——

FRED [*hurrying on vehemently*]. And it's one against the other now—the old against the new. You've got to decide which it's to be—which it's to be for you, not for me. [*Gesturing round the scene*] Is it to be this, or out there—out there together where life will be hard, but where we will live, live?

DAVID [*taking Clara by the arm*]. A beggar's life. Come, Clara.

FRED [*roughly*]. But not a beggar's death.

[*And now the Major's voice breaks across the scene, nearer at hand.*]

THE MAJOR'S VOICE. Attention!

DAVID. They're ready, Clara.

[He hands her the flowers, which she takes abstractedly.]

FRED *[bitterly]*. Yes, flowers—giaves—exercises over the dead. Ah, Clara, but you'll not give in to it. What is this empty duty they talk about, when I love you? All these days you've seen it in my eyes—felt it shaking in my voice. *[Hesitating an instant and then plunging on]* Here, looking at you now, I worship you. The day I came to the door and saw you standing in that great old hall—standing there so beautiful—so lonely and so beautiful—— Yes, let him listen. I don't care if he hears me, if the whole world hears me. . . .

DAVID. You—you——

FRED *[ignoring him]*. And I've taken these few days of joy—of joy and wonder being near you—saying to-morrow I'd go—to-morrow. But to-morrow passes, and I'm here. Then yesterday when you asked me to stay and work for you—yes, be a hired man—I felt ashamed—ashamed for you that you had asked me, ashamed that I had wanted to stay. And a moment ago you spoke to me like a hired man. Now I can't stay here any more, and you will have to decide for me or against me—yes, for yourself or against yourself. That's what it means. *[David suddenly releases Clara's arm and turns round towards the rear. Fred moves to her, taking her hand in his, the flags falling unnoticed to the ground.]* I'm thinking of you only as a woman now, a woman I love. All the pride and glory that's come down to you out of your history, all the honour and the names cut on them monuments and the flags and the flowers, mean nothing to me. It's you I love, and it's you that will stand with me—out there in Texas, the way the song says?

[For a moment he gazes at her, his eyes searching her face.]

CLARA *[turning helplessly towards the left]*. We're ready, Father,

[Fred looks at her, then turns angrily and despairingly away. The old Major comes slowly into the scene from the lower left, gripping his walking-stick in one hand and a long sabre in the other. He is wearing the hat and full field-coat of a Confederate cavalry major, below which shows his jeans and carpet slippers. He stops, and, turning half-way round, raises his sabre in a trembling salute. Old Kiah comes slowly in, his head lifted, the butt of a flagstaff held against his stomach and the wide, graceful folds of the Confederate stars and bars flowing down almost to the ground. David turns back and picks up the little Confederate flags, his thin face pallid and cold.]

MAJOR *[in a stern voice]*. Clara!

[Clara turns quickly towards him, lifting her chin in the air.]

KIAH. Us presents the colours, sir.

MAJOR *[sticking the point of his sabre sharply down into the ground]*. The Confederate flag—the Southern Cross!

[Kiah stops in front of him. Clara holds her flowers up, and David steps over and takes his place by her side, his hat in his hand. For a moment there is a pause. The Major turns and looks at Clara.]

CLARA *[as if prompting him, her voice colourless and dead]*.
At Gettysburg and Shiloh Field——

MAJOR. At Gettysburg and Shiloh Field in Pickett's charge we followed—— *[He stops.]*

CLARA *[now with a touch of feeling creeping into her voice]*.
On this day——

MAJOR—we lift this banner again over those who sleep in

the hallowed earth, baptized in blood, the symbol of a proud people's humiliation and defeat, but triumphant in duty done. [*He begins to move along towards the right. Kiah and the others follow him. He continues speaking*] In the thunder of the battle, the bellow of the guns, the frightful carnage and the alarm of the war, thy bright colours were never dim. As the poet has so fully said :

“Long days and nights, long years have fled,
And grass grows green upon the graves
Of these immortal, sacred dead
Where their proud banner waves.”

[He leads the way on out at the lower right, opens a little gate, and enters the cemetery. Old Kiah follows close behind him, and Clara and David in succession. The little cortège stops and stands before the graves. A moment passes, and there is no sound as the men stand uncovered and Clara bows her head. In the foreground Fred, as if unconsciously impressed by the scene, slowly removes his cap.]

KIAH [*his voice breaking clearly over the scene*]. Once more, massa and missus, here we is.

MAJOR [*quavering and oratorical*]. And over this hallowed sod we lift this flag, emblem of the sunny South, furled midst blood and tears.

KIAH. In the deep earth, the bright sun shining round you, kin you hear us speaking to you?

[Fred looks about him, suddenly realizes he has his cap off, pulls it quickly on, and goes away at the right.]

MAJOR. Long, long, is stilled the musket's rattle, and hushed is the beat of the warlike drum.

KIAH [*mumbling in response*]. Aye, Lord, Lord Jesus.

MAJOR. But while life is to us, the living, we shall never cease respect and honour to the dead. [*In a voice choked with emotion*] And now we'll place the flowers around and set the flags upon their graves.

[*Once more there is a moment of silence as Clara goes about dropping roses and David sets up the flags.*]

KIAH [*intoning*]. With this flag and flowers we freshen up your poor graves. Strew 'em round about, honey, round and about.

MAJOR. And on the last day before the bar of God Justice shall rise up in her bright robes and plead our cause.

KIAH [*in a voice sanctimonious and deep*]. Aye, Lord, plead they cause.

MAJOR. And death shall not be died in vain, and broken hearts shall be eased, and hopes that flourished green like the bay-tree in a weary land shall stand exalted again.

[*He leads the way farther into the burial ground, with Kiah and David following, until they have all disappeared. Clara remains behind bowed over her mother's grave. And now her handkerchief goes up to her face and her shoulders shake with silent weeping.*]

KIAH'S VOICE [*floating back through the scene in a half-singing chant*]. Out of these ashes, Lord, out of this dust, these that sleep gwine rise again.

THE MAJOR'S VOICE. And once more, fair like the day——
[*David suddenly comes back into the scene and stands by Clara.*]

KIAH'S VOICE. The dead don't suffer, they make no moan. These that sleep gwine rise again.

DAVID [*reading from the tombstones*]. "Clara Hampton Oliver, born February 3, 1843, died April 10, 1876. Devotion was her watchword, loyalty her dream."

THE MAJOR'S VOICE [*returning nearer*]. Now to thy deep untroubled sleep we leave thee. [*He comes slowly back into the scene, his sabre trailing weakly on the ground. He stops by Clara and his hand goes out and rests on her shoulder.*] Ah, my child, your mother's happy there in yonder world where she abides, knowing that we never forget her—that our tears will for ever keep her memory green.

CLARA [*in a low, convulsive moan*]. Father . . .

MAJOR [*his voice quivering*]. And she looks down upon us, blessing us—saying, "Be of good cheer—be not faint-hearted—stand——" [*He sways with weakness. David takes him by the arm as he draws himself up more strongly.*] "—stand firm—I——" Help me into the house, David.

[*David, with a long look at Clara's bowed head, turns and helps the Major across the scene.*]

DAVID [*softly*]. She'll stay now.

[*They go on out at the lower left. A moment passes, and Fred enters at the right front carrying a strapped blanket-roll hung across one shoulder. He stops and stands looking over at Clara's bowed figure, his face stern and determined.*]

FRED [*presently calling to her*]. Clar—Miss Clara. [*She stirs slightly, but remains with her head bowed.*] Ah, and maybe there's no use talking—talking any more, and begging and torturing you—is there? I say, is there? [*She makes no reply. A tremor of anger and bitterness rises in his voice as he goes on.*] Ah, cold and dead you stand there. And cold and dead was your hand when I held it. It had no life, no feeling for me. But there's life out there—down the wide road that waits and calls for us. We would find it, Clara. For the last time I ask you. [*She is silent.*] Proud—proud. Well, I've got my pride too, and I won't keep begging like a dog for a morsel he'll never get. No, that I won't.

CLARA [*in a muffled voice*]. Please leave me—leave me. It's too late, now it is.

FRED. Aye, and then I will. Nothing can keep me here—not even you. I won't stay here to be dragged down, sunk to the bottom to rot and die. [*Helplessly*] But what joy will there be in my heart in the days to come—always remembering you here alone, you here by yourself walking among the shadows with the hunger of life upon you? That's how it will be. I know it.

CLARA [*feverishly*]. I don't listen to him, Mother—I don't listen. Forgive me, forgive.

FRED. Then talk, talk to the hollow grave and let it answer. So they take you, these mighty, all-powerful dead, and I am nothing before them. All the life beating in me and calling to you makes no difference. [*Loudly*] Then I tear it all out of my heart. I trample upon these days and walk that road alone. I can do that. Good-bye. I say good-bye! [*He waits, but she still makes no answer. He flings the blanket-roll up across his shoulders and turns swiftly away. At the summer-house he stops, hesitates, and then picks up the guitar.*] I'll take this with me, like you said. Yeh, I'll play it to ease my heart when I remember. [*He goes out at the right.*]

[*Clara continues standing bowed over her mother's grave. After an instant of silence old Kiah comes back into the scene bearing the flag before him.*]

KIAH. That you, little missy? I'd better bring the flag in from the dews and damps.

CLARA [*as if to herself*]. Yes, that's right.

KIAH. Everything was carried off fine, ma'am. It was a noble speech the Major made to the flag and to the blessed dead folks.

CLARA. Yes, yes.

KIAH. And they'll rest better there knowing we remember.

CLARA. Yes, that's right. That's right maybe.

KIAH [*moving through the little gate and stopping*]. Ah, standing there in the graveyard, seems like I hear the great carriages come rolling up the drive, missy, and the old Colonel was saying, "Light, folkses, and come right in." Then I hear him say again, "Kiah, go hold the horses." And I went and held 'em, and they chomping they bits and shaking they heads and pawing the ground.

[*Fred is heard singing in the distance.*]

CLARA. Listen, Kiah, listen. You hear it—that song on the road?

KIAH [*shaking his head*]. No'm, I don't hear it. But I can see—see old missus, spry as a bird, come running out to meet the company. And the big fire would be jumping in the chimney upstairs, and the holly and the mistletoe hanging on the wall—yes'm. [*Shaking his head*] Ah, yes, little missy, joy and the light and the old days done gone. Music and the singing gone.

CLARA [*her voice wung in a low cly*]. Ah, Kiah.

KIAH. Let grief and stuess and mo'ning pass away—pass away. Must carry the flag back into the house now. Put it by till another year, another year. Us got to be true to the end. Come on, little missy.

[*Clara turns and moves slowly out through the little gate and across the scene to the left. Old Kiah follows after. David enters to meet her. Without a word he places himself by her side, and they go on towards the house. Behind them goes old Kiah, with the Southern Cross held aloft and enfoldingly over them.*]

CURTAIN

After the Tempest

By Geoffrey Trease

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CHARACTERS

MAJOR TONY MANNERS

LADY MARTEN

THE HON. FREDDIE FITZRAIN

PRUDENCE MARTEN

NOVA

SCENE: *A South Sea island.*

TIME: *Twenty years in the future.*

*Applications regarding amateur performances of this play should
be addressed to the author, c/o Messrs George G. Harrap
& Co., Ltd., 182 High Holborn, London, W.C.1*

After the Tempest

The scene is the veranda of a castaways' hut, with exits into the hut and towards the beach. Two rough tables are laid, the larger one for an island banquet, including native wine and coconut-shell cups, and the smaller with playing-cards. There are stools and boxes for seats. There is a flagstaff, with dangling cord and flag ready to hoist. The top of the flagstaff is invisible to the audience.

Major Manners is discovered playing patience at the smaller table. He is an elderly, heavily jovial man, who, in spite of twenty years' isolation, remains essentially pukka and Poona. After a few seconds he imagines he sees something to seaward, drops the cards, and takes up his binoculars.

Lady Marten appears in the doorway of the hut, carrying a bottle or gourd of palm wine. She is about the same age as Manners, and her dress, like his, suggests a determination to keep up appearances to the end. She is labouring under suppressed excitement.

Manners starts guiltily, and tries to conceal the binoculars.

LADY MARTEN. You're not *still* looking for a ship, Major?

MANNERS. No . . . no. Queer bird I saw on the beach, that's all.

LADY MARTEN. You might just as well own up! [*Coming to the big table*].

MANNERS. Well, never say die, y'know.

LADY MARTEN. You've been saying that ever since the shipwreck. Twenty years! They wouldn't go on searching for twenty years—even for us.

MANNERS. No ; but one of these fine days they'll just drop

across us by chance. Good old British Navy, y'know! Got a habit of popping up in the queerest places.

LADY MARTEN. Have you seen Prudence?

MANNERS. She was about somewhere.

LADY MARTEN [*sitting*]. Have a drink?

MANNERS. Er—what is it? Not another of your Swiss Family Robinson recipes?

LADY MARTEN. No, it's quite my own idea. Palm wine. Piue's birthday, you know.

MANNERS. No? By Jove, really?

LADY MARTEN. There's the calendar. [*Indicates a notched post, which Manners crosses to examine.*] She's twenty-one to-day.

MANNERS. That's all correct. [*Accepts a drink.*] Well, here's to her. Chin-chin!

LADY MARTEN. Cheers.

MANNERS. Quite a kick to it!

LADY MARTEN. More?

MANNERS. No, thanks, not just now.

LADY MARTEN. Well, I will. [*Helps herself.*] Did you say you *had* seen Prudence?

MANNERS. Not for a little while. Why? You seem awfully excited about something.

LADY MARTEN. This is rather an important day for me. At least, I think it will be.

MANNERS. You've got something up your sleeve!

LADY MARTEN. Just a moment.

[She goes to the hut, and returns with a passable attempt at a wedding-cake.]

MANNERS. By Jove! Piue's birthday-cake! But . . . why, it's—it's more like a wedding-cake!

LADY MARTEN [*refilling her cup*]. Now you see why I'm excited.

MANNERS [*puzzled and embarrassed*]. But, I say . . . I mean, isn't this a bit sudden?

LADY MARTEN [*mellowing rapidly*]. Ha, ha! No, Tony, it's not for us.

MANNERS. I'd be careful with that stuff, my dear. This hot sun, y'know. I—I don't quite understand. . . .

LADY MARTEN. Prudence and Freddie!

MANNERS. Freddie never said a word to me about it.

LADY MARTEN. The dear boy's so reserved. As a matter of fact, he hasn't proposed yet. . . . At least, he did, but he couldn't make Prudence understand what he wanted. So chivalrous, you know.

MANNERS. But you've made the wedding-cake!

LADY MARTEN. I've promised to explain to her. After all, she *is* twenty-one now, quite old enough to know her own mind—quite old enough to see that in these matters a mother——

MANNERS. Freddie's coming. Shall I hop it?

LADY MARTEN. Oh, no. All these years you've been like a father to him. We've come to look upon you as—cr—*loco*——

MANNERS. In *locum tenens*, what?

LADY MARTEN. That's it. Virgil or somebody, isn't it?

[*Freddie enters from the beach, a weak, timid young man of thirty-four, still essentially the new boy at Eton, desperately anxious to do the right thing.*]

FREDDIE. Could I—could I have a word with you alone, Lady Marten?

LADY MARTEN. It's all right, dear boy. Don't mind the Major, he knows all about it.

MANNERS. I congratulate you, my boy; you're a lucky fellow.

FREDDIE. Thanks awfully, sir. [*To Lady Marten*] Then it's all right?

LADY MARTEN. It will be. I haven't seen Prudence yet. Just run along and tidy yourself up. I'll give you a call.

FREDDIE [*sidling out*]. Right-o! It's really fearfully decent of you, and all that. [*Exit same way.*]

LADY MARTEN. Dear Freddie! But I wish he had your strength of character, Tony. I always think, although he's so very well connected, he's just the teeniest bit weak.

MANNERS. Oh, I wouldn't be too hard on the boy. He'll make Prudence quite a good husband.

LADY MARTEN. The poor child really has no choice. I'm sure I'm the most democratic woman alive, but I've never ceased to thank heaven for one thing. . . .

MANNERS. Oh?

LADY MARTEN. That the only young man shipwrecked with us was also the only one on board we could possibly have known.

MANNERS. Well, *I* wish some more young men *had* been saved. Couple of dozen, say—even if some of 'em were third-class passengers. Or even crew.

LADY MARTEN. But how dreadful! On an island this size?

MANNERS. We could have played cricket.

LADY MARTEN. Oh.

MANNERS. Nothing else wrong with young Freddie. He was only fourteen then, only had one half at Eton—never played any Rugby. . . . I've done my best, but you can't do much with the bladder of a sucking-pig.

LADY MARTEN [*icily*]. I have never wished to.

MANNERS. No—er—naturally not. [*Awkward pause.*]

LADY MARTEN. I wish we could have waited till we were rescued. But it's no good. It isn't very nice, you know, living all cooped up together like this on such a very small island.

Even if we were rescued to-morrow—well, you know how people talk. . . .

MANNERS. Quite.

LADY MARTEN. I'm sure it'll be quite all right in the circumstances if *you* perform the ceremony. We look on you as the head of our little community. . . . And then . . . well, your father was a bishop, wasn't he? Every little helps.

MANNERS. What about Prudence? I mean, she's an independent sort of girl.

LADY MARTEN. In spite of all our difficulties, I do flatter myself I've brought her up in the right way. And in these matters, as Prudence very well realizes, a mother knows best.

MANNERS. Rather!

LADY MARTEN. Besides, very fortunately, she can't remember any other young men.

MANNERS. Except the natives.

LADY MARTEN. Natives! Well!

MANNERS. She's apt to be a bit too familiar with them. Of course, it is a very small island, and if it hadn't been for them in the early years we should have starved. . . . But we shouldn't let them presume on that.

LADY MARTEN. Marriage will steady her. As Freddie's wife she will have a position to keep up.

MANNERS. She has now, if you ask me! [*Pointing*] Look at her up that palm-tree!

LADY MARTEN [*in a flutter*]. Prudence! *Prudence!* Come down this minute!

PRUDENCE [*off-stage*]. Coming, Mother. Heads!

[*A coconut, in its full outer husk, bounces in mid-stage.*]

MANNERS. That was a narrow shave! 'Minds me of something that happened near Poona. 'Nother fellow and I——

[*Prudence enters. With her scanty attire of island*

materials, her brown skin, and her natural grace, she might be mistaken for a native—until she opens her mouth and talks County English. But in manner she is frank, ingenuous, and practical.

PRUDENCE. Hullo, what a spread! Not time for dinner, is it?

LADY MARTEN. Tony, would you mind? This moment is rather sacred.

MANNERS. Oh, rather! I'll buzz off. Ta, ta!

[Exit towards beach.]

LADY MARTEN. Come here, darling; sit down close beside me. You remember, Prudence, when you were younger, we had a little talk like this——

PRUDENCE. And I scoured the island for weeks afterwards to find those bushes—what were they called?—gooseberries. And I couldn't find one.

LADY MARTEN. Well, now you are old enough to be told that such stories are only beautiful allegories. Babies really——

PRUDENCE. Oh, babies! What the natives have after they——

LADY MARTEN. Prue, please! It isn't nice.

PRUDENCE *[surprised]*. Isn't it?

LADY MARTEN. That's the worst of these small islands. I've tried to protect you. It only shows it would be folly to wait any longer. I want you to marry Freddie.

PRUDENCE. Now that *wouldn't* be very nice, I should think.

LADY MARTEN. Nonsense, child! Freddie's a splendid catch. Between you and me, if we hadn't been thrown together on this island you'd never have got near him.

PRUDENCE. No, Freddie's hopeless. He can't climb trees, and he's afraid of sharks.

LADY MARTEN. But he happens to be one of the foremost young men in England! He may even be Lord Vassington by now—probably is. His father was drinking himself to death twenty years ago. If only we had a radio we might find out. So tiresome.

PRUDENCE. What does it matter? Freddie's Freddie, and always will be. He's all *right*, I suppose, but——

LADY MARTEN. He's passionately in love with you.

PRUDENCE. Is he?

LADY MARTEN. He has been for years.

PRUDENCE. He's never said so.

LADY MARTEN. He did try to, but he never quite made you undeistand. He's such a decent, clean-living young man. . . . "Say no more," I told him, "until Prudence is old enough to decide for herself." Freddie is an Englishman. After that his lips were sealed.

PRUDENCE. Is *that* what passion means? I like the way the natives just go and——

LADY MARTEN. Prudence, child! Need you be anthropological?

HERS. 207-2 (Her enunciation of the last word indicates that the palm wine is taking effect.

PRUDENCE. It isn't that I don't want to mate, Mother. I do, but——

LADY MARTEN. Please! Our huts may be no better than dog-kennels, but we need not absorb the atmosphere completely.

PRUDENCE [*thoughtfully*]. I'd much sooner have one of the natives, really.

LADY MARTEN. *A black man?*

PRUDENCE. They're not black. Only a bit darker than me. What does it matter? Must we *match*?

LADY MARTEN. It's quite impossible. Utterly. I'm sure

I've tried to bring you up properly. I can't think where you get these peculiar ideas. Not Major Manners—he's correctness incarnate. Not dear Freddie. Perhaps your poor dead father . . . *heredity* . . .

PRUDENCE. Oh, well, it's not worth making a *fuss* about, is it? You seem to have got everything ready.

LADY MARTEN. I've done my best, as a little surprise for you. [*Pathetically*] I wanted to-day to be the happiest day of your life, as it will be of mine.

PRUDENCE. All right. Pity to waste the excuse for a *beano*. We might as well go through with it.

LADY MARTEN. That's my own child speaking! Now here comes Freddie. Do be nice to him for my sake. And remember he's paid you the greatest honour that any man can pay to a woman.

[*Freddie re-enters from the beach. He has made a grotesque attempt to spruce himself up as a bridegroom.*]

PRUDENCE. Hullo! Did you find any *turtles' eggs*?

FREDDIE. No—er——

LADY MARTEN [*coyly*]. Now, you two children! You shouldn't really be seeing each other just at this very special moment, but in the circumstances . . .

PRUDENCE. Mother says you're in love with me. Are you?

FREDDIE. Ye-es, I am. Is it all right, Lady Marten? I mean, can I——?

LADY MARTEN. You can speak out now, my dear, patient boy. I've broached the little matter to Prudence, and I'm happy to say I can congratulate you!

FREDDIE [*overcome*]. Oh, I *say*! Thanks frightfully! Prudence, do you mind——? [*Pecks her nervously.*]

PRUDENCE. Why, Freddie, you've shaved! And it's only Thursday!

FREDDIE. Well, naturally, on a chap's wedding-day. I mean, dash it all——

PRUDENCE. It was sweet of you. I know that old razor must be hell.

LADY MARTEN. You two must have lots to say to each other. I'm just going to slip inside and titivate myself up. You won't want me here playing gooseberry!

[She goes into the hut, taking with her, as an after-thought, some of the palm wine.]

PRUDENCE. If we ever are rescued I shall want to see a gooseberry more than anything else. They're always cropping up.

FREDDIE *[after a pause]*. I say, you don't mind awfully, do you? Marrying me, I mean.

PRUDENCE *[casually]*. Oh, no, not awfully. We can always stop if we don't like it, I suppose. Funny thing—one of the natives wanted to marry me the other day.

FREDDIE. I say! The dirty blighter!

PRUDENCE *[literally]*. Oh, he wasn't dirty. We'd just been swimming.

FREDDIE. I hope you squashed him. You shouldn't go about alone with these blacks.

PRUDENCE. But, Freddie, he'd paid me the greatest honour a man can pay a woman. Mother says——

FREDDIE. If I'd been there I'd have knocked him down!

PRUDENCE. Don't be silly; you couldn't.

FREDDIE *[deflated]*. I'd have had a dashed good try.

PRUDENCE. Don't worry; I said no. Anyhow, Mother says it's impossible—I don't know why—and I've said I'll have you, so that's that.

FREDDIE *[earnestly]*. I will try to make you happy, Prudence. And if ever we get off this appalling island——

PRUDENCE. What's wrong with it? *~~~~~*

FREDDIE. You've never known anything else. I can remember the outside world. Lovely food—always different. Big houses and proper beds, no insects, and none of these awful storms. No wood-chopping, no water to fetch. Do you know, you just turn a thing called a tap, like that, and the water spurts out!

PRUDENCE. I can never imagine what people do with their time.

FREDDIE [*incredulously*]. Can't you? Why, there's huntin' and fishin'——

PRUDENCE. We've got that here. But people there don't need to. The food's brought to them.

FREDDIE. Then there's dancin'—you'd like that, being a girl, 'cos of all the nice dresses——

PRUDENCE. The natives have good dances. But they don't wear any clothes.

FREDDIE. Probably don't in England by now!

[Manners comes in from the beach direction, tidied, a prayer book in his hand, and his mind on the unfamiliar part he has to play. He does not at first notice the happy pair, who watch him in awed silence as he paces out the positions for the wedding ceremony. He has just taken his stance, found the place, and cleared his throat for a private rehearsal, when he becomes aware of their presence.]

MANNERS. Oh, I say, I'm fearfully sorry—didn't mean to butt in——

PRUDENCE. Don't worry, Tony; we've not started being married yet. In fact, we're waiting for you to do us. Then we can get on to the food. Looks pretty good, doesn't it, Freddie?

FREDDIE. Oh, rather!

MANNERS. Your mother's been at great pains, Prudence, to make this show a big success. Look, she's even rigged up a sort of wedding-cake.

FREDDIE. So she has! You know, I think your mater's simply wizard.

PRUDENCE. Well, you'd better not let her hear you say so!

FREDDIE. What?

PRUDENCE. That's she's withered.

FREDDIE. Good Lord, no—*wizard*! Something we used to say in England, y'know. Means marvellous.

MANNERS. By Jove, she's managed even the decorations—silver shoe, horseshoe, white heather, wedding-bells. . . . You're a lucky girl, Prue. A mother in a million, and a jolly stout fellow for a husband!

FREDDIE. Oh, I *say*, sir——

MANNERS [*slapping him on the back with sledge-hammer violence*]. And you, my boy, are the luckiest dog in England—only we're not in England, more's the pity. Have a drink? [*Pouring it out*] Prue?

PRUDENCE. That? No, thanks; I'm hungry. Let's get it over. I'll fetch Mother. [*Runs into the hut.*]

MANNERS. To the future Lady Vassington!

FREDDIE. If we ever get away from here.

MANNERS. Never say die, young fellow. One of these fine days——

FREDDIE. Yes, sir, the British Navy——

MANNERS. Quite!

[*Prudence returns, looking amused and puzzled.*]

PRUDENCE. Mother's just coming. She's a bit queer, I'm afraid.

MANNERS. Queer? [*Significantly*] Not——?

PRUDENCE. Yes, definitely.

FREDDIE [*embarrassed*]. Oh, I'm sure it isn't . .

[His remark is completed by an eloquent moment of silence.]

PRUDENCE. She's been mopping up this stuff, and she doesn't really know how to make it—not like the natives.

MANNERS. Pity she didn't wait till—er—the reception!

PRUDENCE. She'll be all right if we humour her. She's just a bit mixed. She's dragged some ghastly old garment out of her sea-chest—something she must have been hoarding ever since we landed—and she's not quite sure where she is. She called me Battersby.

MANNERS. Battersby? That was her maid.

FREDDIE. If your mater would rather postpone things—

PRUDENCE. You just try her!

MANNERS [*diplomatically*]. It's her—her nerves, really, of course. Very highly strung. We'll just have to play up to her, that's all. [*Lady Marten appears in the doorway of the hut, having arrayed herself as far as possible for a fashionable wedding. She is now extremely mellow.*] Charmin', by gad!

FREDDIE. You look simply ^{gorgeous} ~~wiz~~.

PRUDENCE [*hoarsely*]. Shut up!

MANNERS. You don't look a day older than when we landed.

LADY MARTEN [*distantly*]. I beg your pardon? You may show me to my seat. I am the bride's mother.

MANNERS [*playing up to her*]. Oh—er—of course, your ladyship. Will you come this way?

[They solemnly perambulate round the stage, and he finally bows her to a seat by the card-table on the opposite side from the hut.]

LADY MARTEN. Thank you so much, young man.

MANNERS [*moving to position in the doorway*]. Will you two come and stand here? [*Placing them on correct sides*] Must do everything to regulations, eh, what? We may be Robinson Crusoes, but we're still English!

[*Begins to take the service, which proceeds as a mere inaudible murmur to the audience.*]

LADY MARTEN [*swaying gently and soliloquizing*]. I'm so glad it *was* St Margaret's. I always say, Hanover Square is all very *well* . . . What a beautiful picture they make! I'm the most modern person alive, but I do like a church wedding. After all, it is a sacred occasion. Only a mother can ever understand . . . only a mother . . . And register offices haven't any music. What's a wedding without an organ? Tum-tum-ti-tum, tum-tum-ti-tum . . . I *adore* organs. After the champagne. No, the champagne comes after the organ. Tum-tum-ti-tum, tum-tum-ti-tum . . .

PRUDENCE. No, I won't obey.

[*They all come down centre, arguing.*]

MANNERS. But, dash it all, it's in the book!

PRUDENCE. I don't want to say it.

LADY MARTEN [*rising*]. What is all this disturbance? Prudence, child! At the altar, in front of all these people——

PRUDENCE. Don't be silly, Mother, there aren't any people. You're a bit tight, that's all.

LADY MARTEN. I certainly am not! The—the idea! I dozed in the heat, that's all. Definitely! Major Manners, will you explain, please?

MANNERS. Prudence doesn't quite like this bit in the service——

LADY MARTEN. Never mind, miss it out! That's what they all do nowadays. After all, the spirit is the main thing, isn't it?

PRUDENCE [*significantly*]. Apparently!

MANNERS. Shall we—er—carry on? [*They do so.*]

LADY MARTEN. The dear children . . . standing on the threshold of the great adventure!

[*The hum of an approaching aeroplane is heard.*]

PRUDENCE. What's that?

LADY MARTEN. The island's full of noises. Do get on with the wedding.

PRUDENCE. But, look! Look, Tony, it's a huge bird!

MANNERS. Gad, it's an aeroplane!

FREDDIE. I'll light the bonfire! *[Rushes out.*

MANNERS. We're saved—if only they see us! Quick, wave—wave anything!

PRUDENCE. It's wonderful! Are there men inside it?

MANNERS. Yes . . . but it's passing over. Hell, they haven't seen us!

LADY MARTEN *[sobered by shock, and becoming progressively more rational]*. But they must! Hi! *[Regally, as though hailing a taxi]* Hi, airman!

MANNERS. It's all right, they're circling round to land. Looks like a seaplane, but they've changed so much.

PRUDENCE. It's coming down in the lagoon. Let's go!

MANNERS. No, I think we'd better wait for them here. We don't know who they are. They may be Americans. They may even not be white. We mustn't do anything *infra dig*.

[Freddie re-enters, breathless.

FREDDIE. They've landed—we're saved—it's unbelievable!

MANNERS. Steady, old chap, don't give way.

LADY MARTEN. I wonder if they'll be able to take us off immediately? It looked rather a little aeroplane.

MANNERS. They'll have radio, that's the main thing. And there's sure to be a British ship within a few hundred miles.

LADY MARTEN. In that case, don't you think it might be better to wait until St Margaret's? . . . Though I'm sure, Tony, you're doing it *beautifully*.

MANNERS. All in the day's work, don't y'know.

LADY MARTEN *[thoughtfully]*. Let's see, we shall get to

London in time for the season. Of course, Freddie, you'll realize that Prudence will still need her mother a long time, to steer her through the pitfalls of the social round?

FREDDIE. Of course. Rather!

LADY MARTEN. In so many things she'll be more ignorant than a child fresh from school. She'll want lessons in deportment; she'll need tennis, riding, dancing. . . . Thank heaven we saved the cards—she won't have to learn bridge, anyhow, except all the latest conventions. We must put her in the hands of a good dressmaker, and a hairdresser, of course. She'll have such news value, coming from a desert island, she'll be the sensation of the season!

MANNERS. Freddie may find things a bit awkward. I mean, you weren't at Eton very long, were you? But I'll show you the ropes.

FREDDIE. That's awfully good of you, sir.

PRUDENCE [*who has been standing on one side, disapproving and silent*]. You can show Freddie the ropes, but he won't be able to climb them.

MANNERS. Ha, ha! We shall all feel a bit strange at first. Things change in twenty years. But we'll soon find our feet.

FREDDIE [*gaining confidence a little*]. You must all come and stay with us at Vassington. The trout were pretty good there, I remember, *and* the pheasants. Then there's the Hunt Ball—Prudence will like that.

PRUDENCE. Prudence isn't coming.

LADY MARTEN. Not coming?

PRUDENCE. I've heard about your blessed England till I'm sick of it. I don't want to be rescued. I don't want to go back. What is there for me to go back to? I'm not like you; I've never *had* any of it. It means just nothing.

LADY MARTEN. You don't understand, darling child——

PRUDENCE. I do. I know all about civilization. You've all three talked of nothing else since I can remember. And England sounds just mad to me.

MANNERS. Mad? England mad?

PRUDENCE. Yes. People spend all their time doing silly things they don't want to do, and not being able to do the things they *do* want. . . .

LADY MARTEN. Don't be childish, Prue. As Freddie's wife—perhaps as Lady Vassington now—[*With a significant glance*] though I'm sure we all hope . . . Well, at all events, in your new position, whatever it is, you'll have everything that heart can desire. Every house in London will be open to you. You'll go where you like and do what you like.

PRUDENCE. Shall I be able to drive a big red motor-bus?

LADY MARTEN. What a ridiculous notion!

PRUDENCE. There you are. But I shall have to take lessons in this, that, and the other, how to stand, and walk, and talk—as if I didn't know already! I don't want to.

FREDDIE. What do you want, Prudence?

PRUDENCE. To be free.

LADY MARTEN. Let me tell you, when I was your age—

PRUDENCE. And if I can't be free anywhere else I'll stop here and be free by myself. Or with the natives.

FREDDIE. I say, you can't really mean you'd drag out your life on this barbarous island—

PRUDENCE. It isn't barbarous. It's simple. And it's sensible. We hunt and fish because we have to, to live. We dance because we—

LADY MARTEN. "*We*" dance?

PRUDENCE. I shall in future, anyhow.

MANNERS. Oh, no, you won't, young lady. We've got to be firm over this. We can't leave a lone white girl—

PRUDENCE. I shan't be lone.

MANNERS. No! But we'll take you with us if we have to carry you——

LADY MARTEN. Oh, do stop squabbling! Here they come, with all the natives jabbering round them. [*Noises off.*]

MANNERS. The natives won't come near your hut—they know my boot too well.

PRUDENCE. There's only one airman.

LADY MARTEN. What astonishing clothes!

MANNERS. The fellow's in fancy dress! Can't be British.

FREDDIE. Shouldn't we hoist the flag?

MANNERS. Of course. And the ladies had better receive him seated.

[The ladies sit down, Lady Marten assuming a vice-regal expression. Freddie hoists the flag—which can 'break' out of sight—and Manners salutes. Freddie imitates him, and an impressive tableau is composed.]

FREDDIE. I say, it isn't a man at all—it's a girl!

[Nova enters from the beach, a matter-of-fact girl of seventeen, clad in the garments of the future, as they may be conceived by the designer of the production.]

MANNERS [*to Lady Marten*]. Foreigner—better try French . . . [*Stepping forward, with atrocious accent*] *Parlez-vous français, mademoiselle?*

NOVA. *Mais oui, un peu.*

MANNERS. *Voulez-vous une chaise*—I mean, *une boîte*? [*Offers packing-case with a bow*] 'Fraid my French is a bit rusty, Lady Marten. Would you have a go?

NOVA. Oh, you *do* speak English?

MANNERS. I should jolly well think so. We *are* English. You don't mean to say you——

NOVA. Only half. My mother was a negress.

[*Extremely pregnant pause.*]

LADY MARTEN [*coldly, to Manners*]. Are we to understand that this—person—is in charge of the aeroplane?

NOVA [*cheerfully, being quite unconscious of the situation*]. You mean me? My name's Nova. Yes, I'm flying solo to New Zealand. And I'm hungry. Excuse me.

[*Sits down and helps herself to fruit.*]

LADY MARTEN. Pray don't mind us. We've waited to be rescued for twenty years; another few minutes won't matter.

NOVA [*pulling out a school notebook*]. How interesting! This cake! It's like what I've read about. Isn't it what people used to call a wedding-cake?

LADY MARTEN. It is a wedding-cake. I made it.

NOVA [*with naïve delight*]. These symbols—the shoe and the bells and everything! What a quaint survival of the old tribal superstitions! I didn't know anyone in the world still believed in this sort of thing. I must mention it in my holiday essay.

PRUDENCE [*who is clearly attracted to the newcomer*]. Your what?

NOVA. My holiday essay. I'm still at school, you see. This trip is my holiday research task.

LADY MARTEN. You mean you're flying about the world alone—yet you're still at school?

NOVA. Yes. Eton.

LADY MARTEN. }
MANNERS. } *Eton?*
FREDDIE. }

NOVA. Oh, it's not much of a place, I know, compared with the new schools we're building, but we have to manage for the present. So much was smashed up.

FREDDIE. You mean to say that Eton is now a girls' school?

NOVA. And boys'.

LADY MARTEN. Co-educational?

NOVA. Of course. All schools are.

MANNERS. Good God!

NOVA. How long have you all been here, out of touch with the world?

MANNERS. Twenty years. We can't understand why no ships came near.

NOVA. There weren't many ships left. It's only now that we're starting to build up communications again. It is interesting to meet you. There are so few old people now.

LADY MARTEN. We are not old. We are—mature.

NOVA. But you can remember things as they used to be. I can't. I suppose you knew London when people lived there?

LADY MARTEN. Don't they now?

NOVA. Only the curatois. I went round the ruins last year. It was very instructive.

LADY MARTEN [*clinging to realities*]. There's one thing I want to ask you: who is the present Lord Vassington? Or, rather, who holds the title in England?

NOVA. Lord? Title? But that's feudalism.

LADY MARTEN. You don't mean to say you've abolished the peerage? But—really—how is one to know the people one *can* know?

NOVA. That sounds a little involved. I don't get on to philosophy till next term.

MANNERS. It's clear enough to me. The whole damn' world's been turned upside down.

NOVA. It must be hard for you to make the necessary mental adjustments. You see, after the Tempest——

PRUDENCE. The tempest? You mean the storm that wrecked our ship?

NOVA. No. We speak of the Tempest, because it wasn't only the war—it was barbarism, famine, plague. It rolled round the world like a cyclone. [*Grimly*] I can remember the end of it. I—I don't like remembering.

LADY MARTEN. We seem to have been well out of it.

NOVA. Everything was smashed up. The population was halved——

MANNERS. But the Empire?

NOVA. Oh, we learned all about that in political economy. [*Brightening*] Of course, there still was one when you came here.

MANNERS. This is a nightmare!

LADY MARTEN. In the circumstances, I don't really know that I should care to go back.

NOVA. But it's lovely now! We're so happy. It isn't a nightmare; it's like the morning after one.

LADY MARTEN. I hardly think we should be wanted.

NOVA. But we want every one. Of course, we've got marvellous *machines*, but we still need every hand to work them——

LADY MARTEN. Work! That convinces me. You wouldn't know how to treat people of our type.

NOVA. But we should! Our psycho-analysts can deal with *any* abnormality. You just go along to a clinic and be readjusted——

LADY MARTEN. We are in no need of readjustment. As for abnormality——! It seems that we alone have remained sane in a world gone mad.

NOVA [*shrugging her shoulders*]. Well, I must be flying. [*To Prudence, with whom she has already established a bond of instinctive sympathy*] I do want to get to New Zealand by

daylight. There's a boy expecting me—we've only seen each other by television, so it's rather exciting. [*To the others*] But I'll make arrangements to have you collected as soon as possible.

MANNERS. Collected! I say, as if we were returned empties!

NOVA. I've room for one passenger now. Would you like to come?

LADY MARTEN. No, thank you.

NOVA. You then?

MANNERS. Thanks awfully, no. Got to stick to my party, y'know.

NOVA. What about you? [*To Freddie.*

LADY MARTEN. Freddie won't. He's married to my daughter—more or less. None of us will be going.

NOVA. Right, good-bye then. Sorry to rush off like this! I'll tell them in New Zealand, and next time there's a bigger 'plane passing——

LADY MARTEN. You needn't trouble, so far as I'm concerned. I always looked forward to seeing civilization again, but since you tell me London is in ruins——

MANNERS. And the world's upside down——

FREDDIE. And Eton's co-educational——

LADY MARTEN. I ask you, what is there to go back to? I for one shall remain on this island and end my days in peace.

MANNERS. So shall I.

FREDDIE. Oh, let's all stay! The world sounds awful now.

LADY MARTEN. We *shall* all stay. You may take that as definite.

MANNERS. Stick together and pull together. We may live on a desert island, but, thank God, we've kept our standards. Seems to me, y'know, if the real old spirit is to survive anywhere it's up to us four——

PRUDENCE. You needn't count me. I'm going.

LADY MARTEN. Prudence! And desert your mother?

MANNERS. It's hardly cricket, y'know——

PRUDENCE. Of course it isn't—it's serious.

NOVA. Well, do make up your minds; I'm late.

PRUDENCE [*eagerly*]. Shall I be able to work an aeroplane like yours?

NOVA. Of course.

PRUDENCE. Then let's go. This island's too small. I want something bigger—something *new*. Good-bye, Mother, I'll fly back and see you soon. Good-bye, Tony——

FREDDIE. What about me? I say, you promised——

PRUDENCE. You'll be happier tied to Mother's apron-strings as you always have been. [*Kisses him good-naturedly.*] Can I go and get in?

NOVA. Please do. [*Prudence runs out to the beach.*]

MANNERS. Hang it, you can't abduct the girl like this!

FREDDIE. What'll happen to us?

NOVA. You'll be famous. You'll like that. Soon the scientists will come to your island; they'll film your customs and make gramophone records. You'll be televised in the broadcast to schools. Your island will become a reservation.

LADY MARTEN. What do you mean?

NOVA [*laughing over her shoulder*]. You're the last surviving specimens. [*Exit.*]

FREDDIE. What did she mean by that?

LADY MARTEN [*sweeping superbly to the card-table*]. Our best course is to ignore the whole unfortunate business. Carry on as if nothing had happened.

MANNERS. Rather! Cut for deal? [*They do so.*]

LADY MARTEN. How tiresome! We can only play cut-throat now. [*Aeroplane heard starting.*]

CURTAIN

The Funk-hole

A FARCE OF THE
CRISIS

By Harold Brighouse

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CHARACTERS

ARNOLD WATERSON

RUPERT WILHERBY

CEDRIC APSLEY

NORMAN MARABLE

THISBE WATERSON

SHEILA ELLIOTT

MRS MARABLE

MRS APSLEY

*The scene is a country cottage in the late
September of 1938.*

*Published separately by Messrs Samuel French, Ltd., to whom
applications regarding amateur performances should be addressed.
The fee for each performance is half a guinea.*

The Funk-hole

The scene is the living-room of a cottage in Somerset in an afternoon late in September 1938—'crisis' period. Waterson bought the cottage in the spring, a pleasant place in which to spend holidays, or, alternatively, and if need be, his refuge from air raids on London. He took over some furnishings, picked up some here and there at local sales, and brightened the room with chintz.

A door centre leads directly to the garden; a door down left to stairs and kitchen. There is a cottage fireplace right in which a fire is burning. Table centre and Windsor chairs: settle above fireplace. The whole is under—rather than over—furnished. At leisure, should he be allowed leisure, Waterson is likely to do much more to this cottage than he has done.

Actually Arnold Waterson is fifty-six, and old enough to feel that he is off the active list; but golf has kept him fit, and he looks considerably younger than his age. He is well placed in life: he went to Oxford. Thisbe, his wife, is a modern fifty, but not in any way aggressively smart. They are pleasant people, and, as Londoners expecting to make sojourn in the country, they are both in tweeds. Thisbe has a fur coat over her costume.

The stage is empty, and the sound of a car drawing up outside is heard. Then Arnold opens door, and Thisbe enters, followed by Arnold.

THISBE. She got the wire all right. There's a fire.

ARNOLD. Yes. [*Opens left door.*] Hullo, Mrs Marable! Are you about?

MRS MARABLE [*off*]. Yes, sir. I'm here.

ARNOLD. I'll get the bags in. [*Exit centre.*]

[*Enter Mrs Marable, left, a strong countrywoman, with apron over her working dress: middle-aged.*]

MRS MARABLE. Good afternoon, m'm. I heard the car, but I was tending the fires upstairs.

THISBE. Thank you, Mis Marable. The place gets damp when it's been left for a few weeks.

MRS MARABLE. Yes, m'm. I've had fires all over ever since your telegram came. I thought you'd be here before now.

[*Arnold re-enters with two large suitcases, which he puts on floor up right.*]

THISBE. We stopped two nights at Oxford. I began to think I should never get my husband away.

ARNOLD. May be the last time I shall see it. Maybe it won't be there to see.

MRS MARABLE. Oxford, sir?

ARNOLD. Those motor-works are altogether too near. They're a legitimate military objective, Mrs Marable, and high-explosive bombs aren't particular where they fall. I wanted to soak Oxford before a regrettable accident puts Magdalen Tower on the ground.

MRS MARABLE. Won't you have the coat off, m'm?

THISBE. Thanks. [*Mrs Marable helps her off with coat and puts it over her arm.*] Yes, I don't need it to-day; but we can't tell how long we'll be here.

MRS MARABLE. No, m'm. [*Goes left with coat; then stops.*] I see what you mean about Oxford, sir. It's like the cows.

ARNOLD. The cows? [*Arnold closes centre door.*]

MRS MARABLE. Well, that's my nephew, sir, and I daresay he's wrong. You know how wild they talk, only he says a cow's as much a legitimate objective as a munitions factory.

THISBE. A cow is?

MRS MARABLE. It's the milk, m'm. My nephew says a cow's a food factory.

THISBE. But if that were true we shouldn't be safe even here. There are so many cows in Somerset. Oh, Arnold!

[*Takes his arm.*]

ARNOLD. Ridiculous . . . a food factory. Anyhow, it's too far-fetched for serious consideration. Oh, no! [*Puts Thisbe in chair.*] This is an oasis of peace in a desert of . . . well, we're not actually at war yet.

MRS MARABLE. No. No, sir. Except that my nephew says we've never really stopped being at war since 1914.

THISBE. Does your nephew live with you?

MRS MARABLE. Yes.

THISBE. He must be a most uncomfortable young man to have about the house.

MRS MARABLE. He's not about that much, m'm. He's captain of the darts club, is our Norman. And then being in the Territorials takes up a lot of his time. He's a corporal.

THISBE. I see. Of course, you do understand, Mrs Marable, that Mr Waterson is older than he looks. He's quite too old for service now.

ARNOLD. Did my bit in the last war. Administrative commission, R.A.F.

THISBE. Yes, you might perhaps pass that round the village, will you? It's so easy to misunderstand when a man is really so very much older than he looks.

MRS MARABLE. I expect it's the golf. It does keep the gentlemen their figures.

THISBE [*insisting*]. Then you'll do that?

MRS MARABLE. That's all right, m'm. I know who pays my wages. [*Again turning to go, and again thinking of what has been said*] So you were in the Air Force, sir? Then you wouldn't be agreeing with my nephew.

ARNOLD. I'm sure I shouldn't.

MRS MARABLE. No, sir. It's his opinion that progress took the wrong turning when it invented aeroplanes. I tell him that's as may be, but I'm not quarrelling with my bread and butter, meaning the wages I get from you. It's you being scared of air-raids that made you buy this cottage and give me the job of looking after it.

THISBE [*rising*]. Well, Mrs Marable, I think——

MRS MARABLE. Oh, m'm, I'm sorry. I was just welcoming you, like, and I expect all the welcome you need is a cup of tea.

THISBE. We've had tea, thanks. We couldn't be sure you'd be here.

MRS MARABLE. I'm here. Would you be wanting me upstairs with you, m'm?

THISBE. No, thanks.

MRS MARABLE. Then I'll look over those tins and pick out something for your dinner. It'll have to be out of the stock for to-night, me not knowing when you'd get here, but we'll do better to-morrow. Far as I know there's still butcher's meat to be bought.

ARNOLD. I should hope so.

MRS MARABLE. You leave it to me, sir.

[*Exit Mrs Marable left, with the coat. Arnold sits.*]

THISBE. Tired, dear?

ARNOLD. Tired of driving. It felt a long way from Oxford.

THISBE. It is a long way.

ARNOLD. All the better, of course. The farther west the safer. Yes, I'm glad to be here, but, you know, is that woman going to be a thorn in our flesh? I really don't remember that she chatted like this when we were down earlier in the summer. She seemed to me rather a find, and now . . . I don't know, a sort of impertinent familiarity. It's going to be troublesome to live with that.

THISBE. I don't think it's meant to be impertinent, Arnold.

ARNOLD. You won't deny the familiarity.

THISBE. I expect that's the companionship of the crisis.

ARNOLD. The what? [*Re-enter Mrs Marable left.*]

MRS MARABLE. I forgot to mention the notice, sir. I put it on the mantelpiece.

[*Finds official form and gives it to Arnold.*]

ARNOLD. Notice?

MRS MARABLE. It'll be nearly a week since he came to me for the key. I couldn't refuse him, could I? Not seeing it was Colonel Anstruther, but I did make a point of coming with him when he looked round the place.

ARNOLD [*leaping up*]. But this is . . . oh!

THISBE. What is it?

ARNOLD. I was always under the impression, Thisbe, that an Englishman's home is his castle. This is my home, I believe.

THISBE. Well, the flat's our real home, but——

ARNOLD. This is a home. I bought it. And now this—this requisition! [*She tries to see the paper, but he won't let her.*] What is the use of a man's having had the foresight to buy a country cottage in the spring if this is what happens to him in the autumn? [*Shows her the paper.*] I am required to take into my house seven persons. Am I running a concentration camp? Seven persons. Mrs Marable, you say the place was inspected?

MRS MARABLE. Yes, sir. Colonel Anstruther went all over it.

ARNOLD. Who is Colonel Anstruther?

MRS MARABLE. Well, he isn't in the Army now, sir. He's an old gentleman. He's chief air warden for the district.

ARNOLD. Too old to count, apparently. How many beds have we?

MRS MARABLE. Four, sir.

ARNOLD. And did it occur to you to mention that my wife and I occupy separate bedrooms?

MRS MARABLE. I did pass the remark, sir.

ARNOLD. Well? What did he say?

MRS MARABLE. He said he presumed you were married, sir.

THISBE [*since Arnold is speechless*]. But seven persons, Mrs Marable.

MRS MARABLE. It's not my reckoning, I'm sure, m'm. He said the front room would make a nice dormitory.

ARNOLD. That is my wife's room.

MRS MARABLE. Yes, sir; by present arrangement.

ARNOLD [*looking at paper again*]. Seven persons. And what sort of persons? Obviously, to begin with, people who, unlike me, have not had the forethought to acquire a place of retreat.

THISBE. They may have thought of it——

ARNOLD. But I acted.

THISBE. Yes, dear. We had the money.

ARNOLD. Evacuated persons. Evacuated from where? Why not from Limehouse? I ask you, why not from Limehouse? I am to take into my house, am I, the evacuations of Limehouse. And they talk about foreign tyrannies! If there's a war will you tell me what we'll be fighting for? I will tell you. Freedom. Freedom! And where's the freedom if——

MRS MARABLE. Excuse me, sir.

ARNOLD. What is it?

MRS MARABLE. I was wondering, would you like a bottle of whisky from the cellar?

ARNOLD. Mrs Marable, that's the most human thing you've said to-day.

MRS MARABLE. Very well, sir. [*Exit Mrs Marable left.*]

ARNOLD [*with a last look at the abominable paper, and pocketing it*]. I'd give something to know who'll be drinking my whisky next week. You think ahead of the crowd. You act in good time. You buy a place in the country before the country property market goes up to panic prices, and you stock your larder and your cellar. And this is what you get for it. Seven toughs from Limehouse.

THISBE. We don't know that they'll be from Limehouse, Arnold. And they're more likely to be women than men. Old women.

ARNOLD. Old women? Oh, this gets worse! What was that you said? The companionship of the crisis. That was it. Yes, so my contribution to the companionship of the crisis is to preside at a mothers' meeting in session for the duration. [*Re-enter Mrs Marable with whisky, soda, and glasses.*] How many hot-water bottles have we, Mrs Marable?

MRS MARABLE [*puzzled*]. Would that be for the whisky, sir?

ARNOLD [*opening bottle and mixing drink*]. No; for the old women. And has your valuable nephew anything on that?

MRS MARABLE. On what, sir?

ARNOLD. On evacuated persons.

MRS MARABLE. He's annoyed.

ARNOLD. I'm glad to hear it.

MRS MARABLE. Yes, sir. He says there's bound to be some of them with pretty young daughters, and if he's called up and away from here what the hell.

THISBE. Did you say "what the hell," Mrs Marable?

MRS MARABLE. Repeating my nephew's remark as requested, m'm, I did.

ARNOLD. Let's hope he's right about the pretty girls.

THISBE [*quietly*]. Yes, Arnold.

ARNOLD. As Dr Johnson said, the finest landscape is improved by a pretty girl in the foreground.

THISBE. I thought he said a tavern.

[*A knock at the door: not a confident knock.*]

ARNOLD [*relieved by an interruption*]. Was that a knock? See what they want, will you? It's probably Limehouse.

[*Mrs Marable opens centre door. Well, it isn't Limehouse and it is a pretty girl: perhaps, if one's critical, a trifle hard-boiled. She wears no hat, and she is in town clothes.*]

SHEILA. Oh, I wonder if I could . . . Will you let me in? It's so far from London, and I've walked most of the way.

[*She certainly does not suggest the tired pedestrian, but she may be. She totters in past Mrs Marable and faints in a reasonably convincing way. Arnold, anyhow, is convinced. Door is left open.*]

ARNOLD. Oh! She's fainted.

MRS MARABLE [*sceptically*]. Looks like it.

ARNOLD. Well, do something. What does one do? [*Lifts whisky.*] This?

MRS MARABLE. That'll be it, sir. I saw it catch her eye before she fainted.

ARNOLD. Not a very kind thing to say, Mrs Marable. Not kind at all. [*Pours whisky.*] Thisbe, do you think if I . . . ?

[*Indicates glass.*]

MRS MARABLE. Sure of it.

ARNOLD. Yes. Need you be cynical? Because the immediate thought that leaped to my mind was that at any rate, and thanks be to heaven, she isn't Limehouse.

[*Kneels by Sheila.*]

THISBE. No, my dear. Much farther west.

ARNOLD. Will you please raise the lady's head, Mrs Marable?

[*A glance between Thisbe and Mrs Marable, but Mrs Marable obeys, and Arnold administers whisky.*]

THISBE. That's neat whisky, Arnold.

MRS MARABLE. She can take it.

SHEILA. Oh! Thank you so much.

[Mrs Marable looks at her shoes.]

ARNOLD. Would you be better sitting? Do let me help you to a chair.

[He raises her and seats her. Arnold is distinctly taken by her, but . . .]

SHEILA. I am most sincerely grateful to you.

MRS MARABLE. Were you saying these are the shoes you walked in from London, miss?

SHEILA. There was a car. Oh, those men, those horrible men! You would think everybody would be decent in a national crisis, wouldn't you?

ARNOLD. I hope everybody is going to be.

SHEILA. They weren't. They weren't. Oh, they gave me a lift all right, but then . . .

MRS MARABLE. The cloven hoof.

SHEILA. I can't say it.

MRS MARABLE. I know, miss. You had to struggle for your more than life itself, and not a hair of your head got out of place.

SHEILA. Can't a girl carry a comb?

ARNOLD. Yes, really, Mrs Marable, your suspicion is disgusting.

THISBE. Perhaps you might leave our visitor to us, Mrs Marable. You have dinner to prepare.

MRS MARABLE. Very well, m'm. Will that be dinner for three?

THISBE. I'll . . . I'll let you know.

[Exit Mrs Marable left.]

ARNOLD. Well, really! That woman's cynicism is simply withering. And they talk about the scepticism of the towns!

I offer you the apologies of my wife and myself for the rudeness of our temporary servant. You do appreciate that in present conditions . . .

SHEILA. Oh, yes. We're all in the same boat, aren't we?

ARNOLD. We are indeed.

THISBE. Which boat is that, Arnold?

ARNOLD. Well . . .

THISBE [*taking charge*]. Perhaps you'd like to tell us something about yourself.

SHEILA. You see, I'm a film extra.

THISBE. Is that it? Yes, the story you told about the men in the car sounded like something from that sort of mind. I'm going to turn the story round. What made those perfectly well-behaved people put you out of their car?

SHEILA. I didn't do a thing.

THISBE. But somehow our gate was journey's end as far as you were concerned.

SHEILA. Yes.

THISBE. Did you bring a bag on this journey?

SHEILA. It's by the door outside.

ARNOLD. Oh, I'll bring it in.

[*Moving up.*]

THISBE [*checking him*]. Not yet.

SHEILA. I'm sorry if I tried to make an entrance, but even if there's going to be a war you can't just walk into people's houses, can you? You've got to make an impression.

THISBE [*eyeing Arnold*]. You half impressed.

SHEILA. Well, honestly, what's a girl like me to do? I'm not faking now. I am a film extra when I can get work, and there won't be any work. It's different for some girls.

THISBE. How?

SHEILA. The useful ones. Girls who can drive a car or work a typewriter. I never pretended I had any brains, so I just thought I'd come to the country to . . .

[*Pauses.*]

THISBE. To what?

SHEILA. That's your car outside, isn't it? And those your bags? You've just arrived yourselves, and I came for the same reason you did. To stop alive.

THISBE. What's your name?

SHEILA. Sheila Elliott.

THISBE. Well, Miss Elliott, I'm not so sure about your brain. I think possibly you have one and that it isn't the sort of brain I like.

ARNOLD. My dear! Besides, in any case——

THISBE. In any case what?

ARNOLD. I mean, Limehouse. Surely——

THISBE. I'm not sure that it is an improvement on Limehouse.

ARNOLD. You're being very difficult, my dear.

[*Rupert appears in doorway with suitcase: a very West End person in his twenties not without good looks. Possibly, indeed, if he wanted to live on his charm he could, but assertive bluff is his line just now.*]

RUPERT. Rosemary Cottage, I believe?

ARNOLD. It's on the gate-post.

RUPERT. Yes. [*Puts bag down.*] Thank you. I consider myself lucky. [*Looks round appreciatively.*]

ARNOLD. Do I understand, sir, that you've been sent?

RUPERT. Sent.

ARNOLD. I see. You have some document?

RUPERT. No. No. But don't let us start to be critical of the organization. They've had to work fast. [*Sits.*] I assure you I'm satisfied with this.

THISBE. I've no doubt you are.

RUPERT. Is any point in doubt?

ARNOLD. Candidly, sir, I had not expected any man so young as you.

RUPERT. Are you by any chance a doctor?

ARNOLD. No.

RUPERT. I thought not. Doctors spot it at sight.

ARNOLD [*moving away*]. Indeed?

RUPERT. Oh, it's not infectious. You can set your mind perfectly at ease.

ARNOLD. It had not occurred to me that the evacuations were a scheme for the preservation of the unfit.

RUPERT. You are yourself fit?

ARNOLD. I am myself, sir, fifty-six years of age.

RUPERT. Yes? Then old and unfit as you and I may be we are alike in our desire to go on living. [*Rising*] Would you care to show me to my room? I'd like to get dug in.

ARNOLD. I'm afraid that——

RUPERT [*with a touch of menace*]. What?

ARNOLD [*apologetically*]. This is all so sudden. We knew nothing of these . . . obligations till we arrived ourselves not half an hour ago, and when you say your room——

RUPERT [*suavely*]. Oh, naturally. You haven't worked it out. My dear host, I wouldn't embarrass you for worlds. Shall I step into the garden while you talk over the choice of a room with your wife and daughter?

ARNOLD. This is not my daughter. But never mind the garden. [*Opens left door.*] Thisbe, we'll just——

THISBE. Yes.

ARNOLD. Oh, whisky's there if you care to help yourself.

THISBE. And if you are not medically forbidden.

RUPERT. Beer is forbidden. Fortunately I am allowed the more expensive forms of alcohol.

ARNOLD. I see.

[*Exeunt Arnold and Thisbe left. Rupert mixes a drink, then observes Sheila.*]

RUPERT. Didn't they teach you that it's rude to stare?

SHEILA. Well, of all the cool gate-crashers!

RUPERT [*putting glass down*]. Oh, there's something here that requires attention, is there? Where do you come from?

SHEILA. Piccadilly's the centre.

RUPERT [*going closer*]. Yes. Sweet little country rosebud you are.

SHEILA. Pinewood and Elstree.

RUPERT. You don't say. And I've come out without my autograph book, Miss——?

SHEILA. Sheila Elliott's the name.

RUPERT. Mine is——

SHEILA. And mine's real.

RUPERT. Well, well, Miss Sheila Elliott, you're putting quite an edge on your conversation. We may be on this desert island for a long time. Fellow-exiles should be friendly.

SHEILA. I doubt if you'll be here for long.

RUPERT. With this couple? Let them try to move me! Or are they particular friends of yours?

SHEILA. No. Why should I worry? She didn't believe my tale.

RUPERT. Tale?

SHEILA. You gate-crashed. I gate-crashed. Only you didn't bother with a tale.

RUPERT. I'm always direct. It's a method of mine. So you told a tale.

SHEILA. And she told me it was something from a film mind.

RUPERT. Insulted you, eh?

SHEILA. The queer thing is that my film mind's still working. It's working on the thought of all the people who went running to their banks for money to keep them going in the country. There must be a mass of bank-notes loose in this countryside, and you can't expect a population to be shifted

without some collapse of law and order. I mean, there'll be gaps.

RUPERT. That's a very curious thought, Miss Elliott.

SHEILA. Yes, it's all curious. I don't know why I'm feeling protective towards this house, but—do you care to go? I expect they're on the telephone. I could call the police.

RUPERT. I'm getting a free show. Miss Sheila Elliott, the great film star, in her famous impersonation of Miss Scotland Yard.

SHEILA. Or is it Miss Scotland Yard in her famous impersonation of Miss Sheila Elliott? Is it Mr Rupert Witherby, the public-school bandit? Which is one of the names you've been convicted under.

RUPERT [*grins with sudden geniality*]. Oh, that's the trouble! Yes, you're no more Scotland Yard than I'm Rupert Witherby, but you know, Miss Elliott, that was a real trouble to me at the time. You've remembered it now because you're in the film business and you're used to recollecting people's photographs. Lord, yes, I got chaffed for months because I look a bit like that fellow. And all that Press stuff about a public-school bandit! It was months before that died down—months. All the same, if you'd thought again you'd have seen why I couldn't be Witherby.

SHEILA. Should I?

RUPERT. Surely he's still where they put him. Don't you remember the sentence?

SHEILA. No. Can't say I do.

RUPERT. That is rather like a woman, you know. Get hold of a story and forget the point. Of course, we both are criminals.

SHEILA. I'm straight.

RUPERT. I'm as crooked as a ram's horn. I gate-crashed.

SHEILA. Oh, I did that.

RUPERT. Yes, partners in crime. I don't know what your colleagues in the police would call it, but I expect they have a name for it. So if there's any question of our being hoofed out we'd better put up a united opposition. Do you agree? [*Arnold and Thisbe return left.*] Oh! Made your arrangements?

ARNOLD. Not entirely. Now please don't take this amiss, Mr . . . ?

SHEILA. Mr Rupert Witherby.

RUPERT. But I said—— [*Glares at Sheila.*]

ARNOLD. Ah, you've introduced yourselves. Yes, it will be pleasant to be all friends if we're to be here together, but the fact is, Mr Witherby, I can't persuade myself that your coming was regular.

RUPERT. Where's the irregularity? You must have had a billeting-order.

ARNOLD. Well, now, for example, what is my name? Unless Miss Elliott has told you?

SHEILA. I don't know your name.

ARNOLD [*to Rupert*]. Do you? You see my point. It is most peculiar that the authorities should send anyone to a house without mentioning the name of the householder.

RUPERT. I was told Rosemary Cottage.

ARNOLD. And not my name. I hate to seem pedantic, but . . . [*Goes to fireplace, then finds paper in his pocket.*] Now where did I leave that notice instructing me to receive a certain number of people? Yes, you won't think me rude if——

RUPERT [*aggressively*]. I'll tell you what I think. This house suits me and——

[*The Apsleys appear centre: they are a comfortable, elderly couple, both well covered with flesh, nice, well-to-do people.*]

APSLEY. Do we intrude abominably?

SHEILA. Well, you've interrupted Mr Witherby. I dare say it's just as well.

[Rupert starts to move towards her, but Arnold passes between them, going up to centre door, and Rupert and Sheila are one to the right, the other to the left of the ensuing scene.]

ARNOLD. I suppose you've been sent here?

APSLEY. Sent? No. Guided, it may be.

MRS APSLEY. I said it would be difficult to explain. I think perhaps— *[As if going.]*

APSLEY. No. The fact is, my dear sir, we are desperate people. Quite desperate. The hotels refuse us. Have you any idea what the hotels are like at present?

ARNOLD. I expect they're prosperous.

APSLEY. A mild description. Quite bluntly, sir, will you accept us as paying guests?

MRS APSLEY. Oh, if you would—of your charity.

APSLEY. Spiritually of your charity. Actually I am provided with ample funds. *[Rupert looks interested, and Sheila notices it.]* My card will give you assurance of respectability. My address . . .

[Proffers card: Arnold takes it.]

ARNOLD. I don't question it, Mr Apsley. By the way, *[glances at Rupert]* my name's Waterson.

APSLEY. I feel outrageous. But what does one do? Outrageous times, outrageous manners.

THISBE. Won't you sit down, Mrs Apsley?

MRS APSLEY. Thank you. The smallest, smallest of rooms would serve.

THISBE. That isn't so easy.

MRS APSLEY. Oh, dear! I hoped you were weakening towards us.

ARNOLD. Oh, we accept you. In fact, we gratefully accept. You are palpably . . . nice people.

APSLEY. I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

ARNOLD. Not at all. [*Shows the requisition.*] If you'll look at this you'll see that I'm required to give house-room to seven persons, and obviously if I'm able to fill up my quota with pleasant people no one's going to impose undesirables on me. The thing will be done: a *fait accompli*. But seven persons—with ourselves, nine—and this is a cottage that *is* a cottage. You see where the difficulty of a room to yourselves comes in?

APSLEY. Candidly, I don't. We must have privacy.

ARNOLD. The inspecting authority didn't seem to think so.

APSLEY. Mr Waterson, I'm prepared to outbid all comers. I have on my person enough cash to guarantee you first-class hotel prices for a considerable period and on top of that to compensate you for inconvenience. Now then!

RUPERT. That interests me.

APSLEY. You mean, sir, that you're offering to bid against me?

RUPERT. It wouldn't be democratic. I consider these are no times for a little man to come it with a big purse over his fellow-citizens. [*He moves up towards him.*]

APSLEY. But, my dear sir, my wife must have a bed. And I do not gather that you are the master of this house.

RUPERT. That's where you're wrong.

SHEILA. Be careful. He——

[*But he doesn't: Norman Marable steps into the doorway, and Rupert comes down a little. Sheila shrinks back. Norman is a weedy youth in country Saturday clothes. With his steel-rimmed glasses and his ill-cut plus-fours he is almost a figure of fun, but not quite. He is a*

competent young man, at present invested with authority.

NORMAN. Good afternoon. Mr Waterson?

ARNOLD. Yes. Have you . . . ?

NORMAN [*introducing himself*]. Special constable and air warden Marable. Member of the district billeting-board.

THISBE. Marable? Not our Mrs Marable's nephew?

NORMAN. What of it?

THISBE. Oh, nothing. We—we've heard of you.

NORMAN. Very likely. I'm favourably known in these parts. Now, sir, may I ask who are all these people?

ARNOLD. Well . . . this is my wife and the others are——

APSLEY. In brief, Mr Waterson's guests.

NORMAN [*looks round*]. A total of six. Well, it's his look-out. Guests aren't going to make any difference to the billeting-board.

ARNOLD. But surely so long as I take the specified number of seven I'm entitled to [*he shows notice to Norman*] make my own quota? I am in course of doing so, monstrous though the numbers are.

NORMAN [*taking it and crumpling it*]. Oh, that's washed out.

.. [*He sits above table, produces from pocket a similar notice, and writes on it; but Arnold misses the significance.*

ARNOLD. What! I never had better news in my life. [*Takes Thisbe's hand.*] My dear, our house is our own again.

[*Norman's smile as he writes is sardonic.*

APSLEY. But, my dear sir, you wouldn't go back on your word. You specifically accepted us.

ARNOLD. I might take you, Mr Apsley, at a price. Elsewhere, I understand, people are profiteering in sand-bags. [*Eyes Rupert.*] But I am free to choose whom I take. I am certainly not to be victimized by bluff.

RUPERT [*picks up his bag*]. I see. I can take a hint.

[*Exit Rupert centre.*]

SHEILA. I don't know; that looked a bit too easy.

ARNOLD [*enthusiastically claps Norman's shoulder*]. You've lifted a great weight, Mr Marable.

NORMAN. Perhaps I shouldn't have said 'washed out,' sir. The correct word is 'varied.' [*Rises and presents fresh notice.*] The new order for this district is no adults, and you having been assessed at seven grown-ups, that'll be fourteen school children. I should add that they have arrived.

ARNOLD. It's impossible.

NORMAN. Not at all. Transportation plans have worked admirably. The children are at present being given tea in the village hall, the object being to allow householders time to prepare billets.

THISBE. You want them to sleep here to-night?

NORMAN. That's the order, m'm.

ARNOLD. Fourteen school children. And from where? From what unmentionable slum?

NORMAN. I'm afraid you're right there, sir. Country air does seem to go to their heads. It's a Bermondsey school, as a matter of fact, but they'll settle down. I'd like to pick you the best, seeing that my aunt works for you, but you'll have to take your chance. We're handling them in alphabetical order.

ARNOLD. Fourteen haphazard brats!

NORMAN. We are all called on to do our duty, sir.

[*Rupert reappears. He leans against lintel.*]

RUPERT. I've chosen your car, Mr Waterson. The petrol's draining out of Apsley's tank. That'll give me all the time I need.

NORMAN [*towards him*]. You can't—

RUPERT [*produces revolver*]. No, I can't do that there 'ere,

can I? Into that corner, the lot of you. Miss Elliott, stop edging towards that door.

[They all, in fact, back from him down right, except Mrs Apsley.]

MRS APSLEY. Young man, I am not accustomed to being spoken to like this.

RUPERT. The dear old lady. Well, now, let's see: which of your husband's ears shall I shoot off just to show you I'm serious? *[Apsley comes from the bunch to her.]*

APSLEY. I fear we must bow to the inevitable, my dear. *[Takes her down right.]*

RUPERT. Hands up, you. You, I'm talking to. Special constable, aren't you?

NORMAN. Yes, and I order you in the name of the law to——

RUPERT. I'll have your wallet too, if you've got one. Every little helps. Two steps to the table and put your wallet on it. *[Norman obeys.]* Back. Up with your hands. Now you, Apsley. *[Apsley puts wallet on table.]* How much did you say you had with you?

APSLEY. Well, I——

RUPERT. All right, it looks fat. Your turn, Waterson. *[Arnold obeys.]* Miss Elliott.

SHEILA. Yes, but I haven't-

RUPERT *[pockets the wallets—his side-pocket]*. No. It's the Turpin touch. You can keep your rings; gentlemen prefer Treasury notes.

[He has backed towards door, covering them. Mrs Marable appears in door with long broom and hits his elbow. He drops revolver. Norman and Mrs Marable each grab an arm.]

NORMAN. Can you hold him, Auntie?

MRS MARABLE. I'd be ashamed of myself if I couldn't

hold a Londoner. He'll break his own wrist if he fights my grip.

NORMAN. That's right. He's ignorant of anatomy. The wallets are in his left pocket, Mr Waterson.

[Arnold gets wallets, and puts Norman's into Norman's pocket.]

Thank you.

ARNOLD. Yours, Mr Apsley. But, Mrs Marable, I simply can't express——

MRS MARABLE. That's all right, sir. You pay me to keep an eye on things, and when I saw him monkeying with the cars I knew something was wrong. Shall we march him to the police-station, Norman?

SHEILA. Don't you need help?

MRS MARABLE. We'll keep it in the family, miss.

NORMAN. That's right, Auntie. If anybody breaks his arm it'll be a Marable. *[Turning Rupert to go.]*

ARNOLD. Just one minute, Mrs Marable.

MRS MARABLE. Yes, sir?

ARNOLD. And you, Marable, as special constable. *[They turn Rupert round again to this.]* I'm leaving Rosemary Cottage under your protection.

MRS MARABLE. Leaving?

APSLEY. But, my dear sir, what about us?

ARNOLD *[picking up his bags]*. You may prefer the country. My wife and I are going back to London. We shan't get anything worse than air raids.

[Exit Arnold with bags, past Rupert, held by the Marables. Thisbe is following.]

CURTAIN

Sunday Costs Five Pesos

A MEXICAN FOLK COMEDY

By Josephina Niggli

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North Carolina. Reprinted from "Mexican Folk Plays,"
by Josephina Niggli, published by the University of North
Carolina Press.*

CHARACTERS

FIDEL, *who is in love with Berta*

BERTA

SALOME }
TONIA } *friends of Berta*

CELESTINA

SCENE: *A housed-in square in the town of the Four Cornstalks (Las Cuatro Milpas) in Northern Mexico.*

TIME: *The present. Early one Sunday afternoon.*

NOTE

WRITTEN in the playwriting course at the University of North Carolina, and originally produced by the Carolina Playmakers at Chapel Hill on April 25, 1936, with the following cast of characters:

FIDEL	.	.	.	.	<i>Ralph Eichhorn</i>
BERTA	.	.	.	.	<i>Ellen Deppe</i>
SALOME	.	.	.	.	<i>Jessie Langdale</i>
TONIA	.	.	.	.	<i>Christine Maynard</i>
CELESTINA	.	.	.	.	<i>Jean Ashe</i>

Applications regarding amateur performances of this play should be addressed to Messrs Samuel French, Ltd., 26 Southampton Street, Strand, London, W.C.2, or 25 West 45th Street, New York

Sunday Costs Five Pesos

The scene is a housed-in square in the town called Four Cornstalks in the northern part of Mexico. On the left of the square is the house of Tonia, with a door and a stoop. At the back is a wall cut neatly in half. The left side is the house of Berta, and boasts not only a door, but a barred window. On the right is a square arch from which dangles an iron lantern. This is the only exit to the rest of the town, for on the right side proper is the house of Salome. Tonia's house is pink, and Salome's is blue, while Berta's is content with being a sort of disappointed yellow. All three houses get their water from the well that is down centre left.

early afternoon on Sunday, and all sensible people are sleeping, but through the arch comes Fidel Duran. His straw hat in his hand, his hair plastered to his head with water, he thinks he is a very handsome sight indeed as he pauses, takes a small mirror from his pocket, fixes his neck bandana [a beautiful purple one with orange spots], and shyly knocks. Then he turns round with a broad grin on his face.

Berta opens the door. Berta is very pretty, but, unfortunately, she has a very high temper, possibly the result of her red hair. She wears a neat cotton dress and tennis shoes, blue ones. Her hands planted on her hips, she stands and glares at Fidel.

BERTA. Oh, so it is you!

FIDEL [*beaming on her*]. A good afternoon to you, Berta.

BERTA [*sniffing*]. A good afternoon indeed, and I bothered by fools at this hour of the day.

FIDEL [*in amazement*]. Why, Berta, are you angry with me?

BERTA [*questioning heaven*]. He asks me if I am angry with him. Saints in heaven, has he no memory?

FIDEL [*puzzled*]. What have I done, Berta?

BERTA [*sarcastically*]. Nothing, Fidel, nothing. That is the trouble. But if you come to this house again I will show you the palm of my hand, as I'm showing it to you now.

[*She slaps him, steps back inside the door, and slams it shut.*]

FIDEL [*pounding on the door*]. Open the door, Berta. Open the door! I must speak to you!

[*The door of Salome's house opens, and Salome herself comes out with a small pitcher and begins drawing water from the well. She is twenty-eight, and so many years of hunting a husband have left her with an acid tongue.*]

SALOME. And this is supposed to be a quiet street.

FIDEL [*who dislikes her*]. You 'tend to your affairs, Salome, and I will 'tend to mine. [*He starts pounding again. He bleats like a young goat hunting for its mother.*] Berta, Berta.

BERTA [*opens the door again*]. I will not have such noises. Do you not realize that this is Sunday afternoon? Have you no thoughts for decent people who are trying to sleep?

FIDEL. Have you no thoughts for me?

BERTA. More than one. And none of them nice.

SALOME. I would call this a lovers' quarrel.

BERTA. Would you indeed! [*Flares at Fidel.*] I would call it the impertinence of a wicked man!

FIDEL [*helplessly*]. But what have I done?

SALOME. She loved him yesterday, and she will love him to-morrow.

BERTA [*runs down to Salome*]. If I love him to-morrow may I lose the use of my tongue—yes, and my eyes and ears too.

FIDEL [*swinging Berta to one side*]. Is it fair, I ask you, for a woman to smile at a man one day, and slap his face the next? Is this the manner in which a promised bride should treat her future husband?

SALOME [*grins and winks at him*]. You could find yourself another bride.

BERTA [*angrily*]. We do not need your advice, Salome Molina. You and your long nose—sticking it in every one's business.

SALOME [*her eyes flashing*]. Is this an insult to me? To me?

BERTA. And who are you to be above insults?

SALOME. I will not stay and listen to such words!

BERTA. Did I ask you to leave the safety of your house?

SALOME [*to Fidel*]. She has not even common politeness. I am going!

BERTA. We shall adore your absence.

SALOME. If this were not Sunday I would slap your face for you.

BERTA [*taunting*]. The great Salome Molina, afraid of a Sunday fine.

FIDEL [*wanting to be helpful*]. You can fight each other to-morrow. There is no fine for weekdays.

SALOME. You stay out of this argument, Fidel Duran.

FIDEL. If you do not leave us I will never find out why Berta is angry with me. [*Jumps towards her.*] Go away!

SALOME [*jumps back, then tosses her head*]. Very well. But the day will come when you will be glad of my company.

[*She goes indignantly into her house.*]

FIDEL [*turns to Berta*]. Now, Berta. . .

BERTA [*interrupting*]. As for you, my fine rooster, go and

play the bear to Celestina Garcia. She will appreciate you more than I.

FIDEL [*with a guilty hand to his mouth*]. So that is what it is.

BERTA [*on the stoop of her own house*]. That is all of it, and enough it is. Two times you walked around the plaza with the Celestina last night, and I sitting there on a bench having to watch you. [*Goes into the house.*]

FIDEL [*speaking through the open door*]. But it was a matter of business.

BERTA [*enters with a broom and begins to sweep off the stoop*]. Hah! Give me no such phrases. And all of my friends thinking, "Poor Berta, with such a sweetheart." Do you think I have no pride?

FIDEL. But it is that you do not understand. . . .

BERTA. I understand enough to know that all is over between us.

FIDEL. Berta, do not say that; I love you.

BERTA. So you say. And yet you roll the eye at any passing chicken.

FIDEL. Celestina is the daughter of Don Nimfo Garcia.

BERTA. She can be the daughter of the President for all of me. When you marry her she will bring you a fine dowry, and there will be no more need of Fidel Duran trying to carve wooden doors.

FIDEL [*his pride wounded*]. Trying? But I have carved them. Did I not do a new pair for the saloon?

BERTA. Aye, little doors . . . doors that amounted to no more than that. . . . [*She snaps her fingers.*] Not for you the great doors of a church.

FIDEL. Why else do you think I was speaking with the Celestina?

BERTA [*stops sweeping*]. What new manner of excuse is this?

FIDEL. That is why I came to speak with you. Sit down here on the step with me for a moment.

BERTA [*scandalized*]. And have Salome and Tonia say that I am a wicked, improper girl?

FIDEL [*measuring a tiny space between his fingers*]. Just for one little moment. They will see nothing.

BERTA [*sitting down*]. Let the words tumble out of your mouth, one, two, three.

FIDEL. Perhaps you do not know that the town of Topo Grande, thirty kilometres from here, is building a new church.

BERTA [*sniffs*]. All the world knows that.

FIDEL. But did you know that Don Nimfo is secretly giving the money for the building of that church?

BERTA. Why?

FIDEL. He offered the money to the Blessed Virgin of Topo Grande if his rooster won the cock-fight. It did win, so now he is building the church.

BERTA [*not yet convinced*]. How did you find out about this? Or has Don Nimfo suddenly looked upon you as a son, and revealed all his secrets to you?

FIDEL. Last night on the plaza the Celestina happened to mention it. With a bit of flattery I soon gained the whole story from her.

BERTA. So that is what you were talking about as you walked around the plaza? [*Stands.*] It must have taken a great deal of flattery to gain so much knowledge from her.

FIDEL [*stands*]. Do you not realize what it means? They will need some one to carve the new doors.

[*He strikes a pleased attitude, expecting her to say,*
"But how wonderful, Fidel."

BERTA [*knowing very well what Fidel expects, promptly turns away from him, her hand hiding a smile, as she says with innocent curiosity*]. I wonder whom Don Nimfo will get?

[*With the delight of discovery*] Perhaps the Brothers Ochoa from Monterrey.

FIDEL [*crestfallen*]. He might choose me.

BERTA. You? Hah!

FIDEL. And why not? Am I not the best wood-carver in the valley?

BERTA. So you say.

FIDEL. It would take three years to carve those doors, and he would pay me every week. There would be enough to buy you a trousseau and enough left over for a house.

BERTA. Did you tell all that to the Celestina?

FIDEL. Of course not! Does a girl help a man buy a trousseau for another girl? That was why it had to appear as though I were rolling the eye at her.

[*He is very pleased with his brilliance.*]

BERTA. Your success was more than perfect. To-day all the world knows that the Celestina has won Berta's man.

FIDEL. But all the world does not know that Fidel Duran, who is I, myself, will carve those doors so as to buy a trousseau and house for Berta, my queen.

BERTA. Precisely. All the world does not know this great thing. . . . [*Flaring out at him*] And neither do I!

FIDEL. Do you doubt me, pearl of my life?

BERTA. Does the rabbit doubt the snake? Does the tree doubt the lightning? Do I doubt that you are a teller of tremendous lies? Speak not to me of cleverness. I know what my own eyes see, and I saw you flirting with the Celestina. Last night I saw you—and so did all the world!

FIDEL [*beginning to grow angry*]. So that is how you trust me, your intended husband.

BERTA. I would rather trust a hungry fox.

FIDEL. Let me speak plainly, my little dove. Because we are to be married is no reason for me to enter a monastery.

BERTA. And who says that we are to be married?

FIDEL [*taken aback*]. Why . . . I said it.

BERTA. Am I a dog to your heel that I must obey your every wish?

FIDEL [*firmly*]. You are my future wife.

BERTA [*laughs loudly*]. Am I indeed?

FIDEL. Your mother has consented, and my father has spoken. The banns have been read in the church?

[*Folds his arms with satisfaction.*]

BERTA [*screaming*]. Better to die without children than to be married to such as you.

FIDEL [*screaming above her*]. We *shall* be married, within the month.

BERTA. May this hand rot on my arm if I ever sign the marriage contract.

FIDEL. Are you saying that you will not marry me?

BERTA. With all my mouth I am saying it, and a good day to you. [*Steps inside the house and slams the door. Immediately opens it and sticks her head out.*] Tell that good news to that four-nosed shrew of a Celestina.

[*Slams the door again. Fidel puts on his hat and starts towards the archway, then runs down and pounds on Tonia's door, then runs across and pounds on Salome's. In a moment both girls come out. Tonia is younger and smaller in size than either Salome or Berta, and has a distressing habit of whining.*]

SALOME. What is the meaning of this noise?

TONIA. Is something wrong?

FIDEL. I call you both to witness what I say. May I drop dead if I am ever seen in this street again!

[*He settles his hat more firmly on his head, and with as much dignity as he can muster strides out*

through the arch. The girls stare after him, then at Berta's door, then at each other. Both shrug; then with one accord they run up and begin knocking on the door.

SALOME. Berta!

TONIA. Berta, come out!

[Berta enters. She is obviously trying to keep from crying.]

SALOME. Has that fool of a sweetheart of yours lost his mind?

TONIA. What happened?

BERTA *[crying in earnest]*. This day is blacker than a crow's wing. Oh, Salome!

[She flings both arms about the girl's neck and begins to wail loudly. Tonia and Salome stare at each other, and then Tonia pats Berta on the shoulder.]

TONIA. Did you quarrel with Fidel?

SALOME. Of course she quarrelled with him. Any fool could see that.

BERTA. He will never come back to me. Never!

TONIA *[to Salome]*. Did she say anything about the Celestina to him?

SALOME *[to Berta]*. You should have kept your mouth shut on the outside of your teeth.

BERTA. A girl has her pride, and no Celestina is going to take any man of mine.

TONIA. But did she take him?

BERTA *[angrily to Tonia]*. You take your face away from here!

SALOME. The only thing you can do now is to ask him to come back to you.

TONIA *[starting towards the archway]*. I will go and get him.

BERTA *[clutches at her]*. I will wither on my legs before I

ask him to come back. He would never let me forget that I had to beg him to marry me. [*Wails again.*] And now he will marry the Celestina. [*Tonia begins to cry with her.*]

TONIA. There are other men.

BERTA. My heart is with Fidel. My life is ruined.

SALOME [*thoughtfully*]. If we could bring him back without his knowing Berta had sent for him. . . .

[*She sits on the edge of the well.*]

TONIA. Miracles only happen in the church.

SALOME [*catches her knee and begins to rock back and forth*]. What could we tell him? What could we tell him?

TONIA. You be careful, Salome, or you will fall in the well. Then we will all have to go into mourning, and Berta cannot get married at all if she is in mourning.

SALOME [*snaps her fingers*]. You could fall down the well, Berta! That would bring him back.

BERTA [*firmly*]. I will not fall down the well and drown for any man, not even Fidel.

TONIA. What good would bringing him back do if Berta were dead?

SALOME. Now that is a difficulty. [*Begins to pace up and down.*] If you are dead you cannot marry Fidel. If you are dead he will not come back. The only thing left for you is to die an old maid.

TONIA. That would be terrible.

BERTA [*wailing*]. My life is ruined, completely ruined.

SALOME [*with sudden determination*]. Why? Why should it be?

TONIA [*with awe*]. Salome has had a thought.

BERTA. You do not know what a terrible thing it is to lose the man you love.

SALOME. I am fixing up your life, not mine. Suppose . . . suppose you did fall in the well.

BERTA. I tell you I will not do it.

SALOME. Not really, but suppose he thought you did. What then?

BERTA. You mean . . . pretend? But that is a sin. The priest would give me ten days' penance at confessional.

SALOME [*flinging out her hands*]. 'Ten days' penance, or a life without a husband. Which do you choose?

TONIA. I will tell you. She chooses a husband. What do we do, Salome?

SALOME. You run and find this carver of doors, tell him that a great scandal has happened—that Berta has fallen in the well.

TONIA [*whose dramatic imagination has begun to work*]. Because she could not live without him. . . .

BERTA. You tell him that and I will scratch out both your eyes!

TONIA. On Sunday?

BERTA [*sullenly*]. On any day.

SALOME. Tell him that Berta has fallen in the well, and that you think she is dying.

TONIA. Is that all?

BERTA. Is that not enough?

SALOME [*entranced with the idea*]. Oh, it will be a great scene, with Berta so pale in her bed, and Fidel kneeling in tears beside it.

BERTA. I want you to know that I am a modest girl.

SALOME [*irritated*]. You can lie down on the floor then. [*Glaring at Tonia*] What are you standing there for? Run!

TONIA [*starts towards the archway, then comes back*]. But . . . where will I go?

SALOME. To the place where all men go with a broken heart—the saloon. Are you going to stand there all day?

[*Tonia gives a little gasp and runs out through the arch.*]

BERTA. I do not like this idea. If Fidel finds out it is a trick he will be angrier than ever.

SALOME. But if he does not find out the truth until after you are married what difference will it make?

BERTA. He might beat me.

SALOME. Leave that worry until after you are married. [*Inspecting Berta*] Now how will we make you look pale? Have you any flour? Corn-meal might do.

BERTA. No! No! I will not do it.

SALOME. Now, Berta, be reasonable.

BERTA. If I had really fallen down the well, it would be different. But I did not fall down it.

SALOME. Do you not want Fidel to come back to you? Are you not in love with him?

BERTA. Yes, I do love him. And I will play no tricks on him. If he loves the Celestina better than he does me—[*with great generosity*] he can marry her.

SALOME [*pleading with such idiocy*]. But Tonia has gone down to get him. If he comes back and finds you alive he will be angrier than ever.

BERTA [*firmly*]. This is your idea. You can get out of it the best way you can. But Fidel will not see me lying down on a bed, nor on a floor, nor any place else.

SALOME. Then there is only one thing to do.

BERTA. What is that?

SALOME. You will go into the house, and I will tell him that you are too sick to see him.

BERTA. That will be just as bad as the other.

SALOME. How can it be? Then if he finds out it is a trick he will blame me, and you can pretend you knew nothing of it. I do not care how angry he is. I do not want to marry him.

BERTA [*with pleased excitement*]. Then he could not be angry with me, could he? I mean if he thought I had nothing

to do with it? And I would not have to do penance either, would I?

SALOME. Not one day of penance. Tonia should have found him by now. [*Goes to the arch and peers through.*] Here they come. . . . And Fidel is running half a block in front of her.

BERTA [*joyously*]. Then he does love me!

SALOME. Into the house with you. You can watch through the window.

BERTA [*on stoop*]. Now, remember, if he gets angry this was your idea.

SALOME [*clasps her hands*]. And what a beautiful idea it is!

[*Berta disappears into the house. Salome looks about her, then dashes over to her own stoop, sits down, flings her shawl over her face, and begins to moan loudly, rocking back and forth. In a moment Fidel dashes through the arch, and stops, out of breath, at seeing Salome.*

FIDEL [*gasping*]. Berta!

SALOME [*whose moaning grows louder*]. Poor darling, poor darling. She was so young.

FIDEL [*desperately*]. She is . . . she is dead?

SALOME [*wailing*]. She will make such a beautiful corpse. Poor darling. Poor darling.

[*Tonia, exhausted and out of breath, has reached the arch.*

TONIA [*looks about her in astonishment*]. Why, where is Berta? Did she go into the house?

SALOME [*in normal tones*]. Of course she went into the house, you fool. Did she not jump down the well? [*Remembering Fidel*] Poor darling.

TONIA [*blankly*]. Did she really jump down it? I thought she just fell in by accident.

SALOME [*grimly*]. Are you telling this story, or am I?
[*Wailing*] Now she can never go to the plaza again.

[*Fidel looks helplessly from Tonia, who cannot quite get the details of the story straight, to Salome, who is having a beautiful time mourning.*]

FIDEL. Where is she? I want to see her.

TONIA [*coming out of her trance*]. She is right in here. Did you say she was on the bed or on the floor, Salome?

SALOME [*getting between them and Berta's door*]. You don't want to see her, Fidel. You know how people look after they've been drowned.

TONIA. But he was supposed to see her. That was why you sent——

SALOME [*glaring at her*]. Tonia, dear, suppose that you let me tell the story. After all, I was here, and you were not.

FIDEL [*exploding*]. For the love of the saints, tell me! Is she dead?

SALOME [*thinking this over*]. Well . . . not exactly.

FIDEL. You mean—you mean, there is hope?

SALOME. I would say there was great hope.

FIDEL [*takes off his hat and mops his face*]. What can I do? Oh, if I could only see her. . . .

SALOME. If you would go to the church and light a candle to Our Blessed Lady and ask her to forgive you for getting angry with Berta . . . perhaps things will arrange themselves.

FIDEL. Do you think she will get well soon?

SALOME. With a speed that will amaze you.

FIDEL. I will go down and light the candle right now.

[*As he turns to leave who should come through the archway but Celestina Garcia. She can match temper for temper with Berta any day, and just now she is on the war-path. Brushing past these*]

three as though they did not exist, she goes up to Berta's door and pounds on it.

CELESTINA. I dare you to come out and call this Celestina Garcia a four-nosed shrew to her face.

SALOME [*trying to push Fidel through the arch*]. You had best run to the church.

FIDEL [*pushing past her and going up to Celestina*]. How dare you speak like that to a poor drowned soul?

SALOME [*to Celestina*]. Why do you not go away? We never needed you so little.

CELESTINA. So she is pretending to be drowned, eh? Is that her coward's excuse?

BERTA [*through window*]. Who dares to call Berta Cantu a coward?

CELESTINA. You know well enough who calls you, and I the daughter of Don Nimfo Garcia.

TONIA. Ai, Salome! And now Fidel will know that Berta was not drowned at all.

FIDEL [*who has been listening to this conversation with growing surprise and suspicion, now turns furiously towards Berta's house*]. Not drowned, eh? So this was a trick to bring me back, eh? I am through with your tricks, you hear me? Through with them!

BERTA [*through window*]. You stay right there until I come out. [*She disappears from view.*]

FIDEL [*turning to Salome*]. I see your hand in this.

SALOME. The more fool you to be taken in by a woman's tricks.

CELESTINA. What care I for tricks? No woman is going to call me names!

BERTA [*coming through the door*]. You keep silence, Celestina Garcia. I will deal with you in a minute. And as for you, Fidel Duran——

FIDEL [*stormily*]. As for me, I am finished with all women. The world will see me no more. I will enter a monastery and carve as many doors as I like. Do you hear me, Berta Cantu?

BERTA [*putting both hands over her ears*]. What do I care for your quack, quack, quack!

FIDEL. Now she calls me a duck. Good afternoon to you!

[*He stalks out with wounded dignity.*]

CELESTINA [*catching Berta by the shoulder and swinging her round*]. I ask you again: did you call me a four-nosed shrew?

BERTA. I did, and I will repeat it with the greatest of pleasure. You are a four-nosed shrew and a three-eyed frog!

CELESTINA. I have always looked on you as my friend—you pink-toed cat!

BERTA. And I have always trusted you—you sly robber of bridegrooms!

[*She raises her hand to slap Celestina. Salome catches it.*]

SALOME. This is Sunday, Berta! And Sunday costs five pesos.

TONIA. If you had to pay a fine for starting a fight on top of losing Fidel . . . Ai, that would be terrible.

[*Berta and Celestina glare at each other, and then slowly begin to circle round each other, spitting out their insults as they do so.*]

CELESTINA. It is my honour that is making me fight, or I would wait until to-morrow.

BERTA. If I had five pesos to throw away I would pull out your dangling tongue, leaving only the flapping roots.

CELESTINA. Ha! I make a nose at your words.

BERTA. As for you—you eater of ugly-smelling cheese . . .

[*They jump at each other, but remember the penalty just in time and pull back. Again they begin to*]

circle round, contenting themselves with making faces at each other. Salome suddenly clasps her hands.

SALOME. You are both certain that you want to fight to-day?

CELESTINA. Why else do you think I came here?

BERTA. These insults have gone too far to stop now.

SALOME. The only thing that stands in the way is the five pesos for the Sunday fine.

TONIA. And five pesos is a lot of money.

SALOME. Then the only thing to do is to play the fingers.

CELESTINA. What?

BERTA. Eh?

SALOME. Precisely. Whoever loses strikes the first blow and pays this fine. Then you can fight as much as you like.

TONIA [*with awed admiration*]. Ai, Salome, you have so many brains.

CELESTINA [*doubtfully*]. It is a big risk.

BERTA [*shrugging*]. Perhaps you are afraid of taking a risk.

CELESTINA. I am not afraid of anything. But Tonia will have to be the judge. Salome is too clever.

BERTA. Very well. But Salome has to stand behind you to see that you do not cheat. I would not trust you any more than I would a mouse near a piece of fresh bacon.

CELESTINA [*pulls back her clenched fist, then thinks better of it and speaks with poor grace*]. Very well.

[Celestina and Berta stand facing each other. Tonia stands between them up on the stoop. Salome stands behind Celestina.]

TONIA [*feeling a little nervous over this great honour of judging*]. Both arms behind your backs. [*The girls link their arms behind them.*] Now, when I drop my hand Berta will guess

going to beat up both of you at once. One [*she takes a deep breath*] with each hand!

[*She nearly falls through the door of her house.*

BERTA [*with false bravado*]. Who is afraid of her?

TONIA. I am. Salome is very strong. It is all your fault. If you had not gotten mad at Fidel this would not have happened.

BERTA [*snapping at her*]. You leave Fidel out of this.

TONIA [*beginning to cry*]. When Salome beats me up that will be your fault too.

BERTA. Stop crying!

TONIA. I am not a good fighter, but I can tell Fidel the truth about how you would not jump down the well to win him back.

BERTA. You open your mouth to Fidel, and I will push you in the well.

TONIA. You will not have strength enough to push a baby in the well when they get through with you.

BERTA. Get out! Get out of here!

[*She stamps her foot at Tonia, and the girl, frightened, gives a squeak and runs into her own house. Berta looks after her, then, beginning to sniffle, goes over and sits on the well. She acts like a child who has been told that it is not proper for little girls to cry, and she is very much in need of a handkerchief. Just then Fidel sticks his head round the arch.*

FIDEL [*once more the plaintive goat*]. Berta.

[*Berta half jumps, then pretends not to hear him. [Enters cautiously, not taking his eyes off Berta's stiff back. He moves round at the back, skirts Tonia's house, then works his way round to her.] Berta.*

BERTA [*sniffing*]. What is it?

FIDEL [*circling the back of the well*]. Are you crying, Berta!

BERTA [*stubbornly*]. No!

FIDEL [*sitting beside her*]. Yes, you are; I can see you crying.

BERTA. If you can see why do you ask, then?

FIDEL. I am sorry we quarrelled, Berta.

BERTA. Are you?

FIDEL. Are you sorry?

BERTA. No!

FIDEL. I was hoping you were, because . . . Do you know whom I saw on the plaza?

BERTA. Grandfather Devil.

FIDEL. Don Nimfo himself.

BERTA. Perhaps you saw the Celestina too.

FIDEL [*placatingly*]. Now, Berta, you know I do not care if I never see the Celestina again. [*Pulls out a handkerchief and extends it to her.*] Here, wipe your face with this.

BERTA. I have a handkerchief of my own.

[*Nevertheless she takes it, and wipes her eyes and then blows her nose.*]

FIDEL. Don Nimfo said I could carve the church doors for him. But he said I would have to move to Topo Grande to work on them. He said I had to leave right away.

BERTA [*perking up her interest*]. You mean . . . move right away from here?

FIDEL. And I was wondering if we could get married to-morrow. I know this is very sudden, Berta, but, after all, think how long I have waited to carve a church door.

BERTA. To-morrow. [*She looks towards Salomé's house.*] They would both be too sore to do anything by to-morrow.

FIDEL [*too concerned with his own plans to hear what she is saying*]. Of course, I know that you may not be able to forgive me—

BERTA. Fidel, I want you to understand that if I do marry you to-morrow . . . that means we will leave here to-morrow, eh?

FIDEL. Ai, yes. I have to be in Topo Grande on Tuesday.

BERTA. I hope you will always understand what a great thing I have done for you. It is not every girl who would forgive so easily as I.

FIDEL [*humbly*]. Indeed, I know that, Berta.

BERTA. Are you quite sure that we will leave here to-morrow?

FIDEL. Quite sure.

BERTA. Very well. I will marry you.

FIDEL [*joyfully*]. Berta!

[*Bends forward to kiss her. But she jumps up.*]

BERTA. Just a moment. We are not married yet. Do you think that I am just any girl that you can kiss me—like that!

[*She snaps her fingers.*]

FIDEL [*humbly*]. I thought . . . just this once.

BERTA [*gravely thoughtful*]. Well, perhaps . . . just this once . . . you may kiss my hand.

[*He kisses it.*]

CURTAIN

Cats of Egypt

By T. B. Morris

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CHARACTERS

CHARMION } *Ladies-in-waiting to Queen*
IRAS } *Cleopatra*
POLYXENA, *slave to Princess Arsinoë*
MITSIERE }
MNESIS } *slaves to Cleopatra*
SADHE }
CLEOPATRA, *Queen of Egypt*
ARSINOË, *sister of Cleopatra*
TWO BOY (OR GIRL) SLAVES

Applications regarding amateur performances of this play should be addressed to Messrs Samuel French, Ltd., 26 Southampton Street, Strand, London, W.C.2, or 25 West 45th Street, New York

NOTE

THE general conception of Queen Cleopatra VII as a dark sorceress of the Nile, all seductions and poisonings, is giving place to a nobler one. She was a woman of great culture and ability, and there is no trustworthy record that she ever gave herself to any man save Julius Cæsar and Mark Antony, to both of whom she was married by Egyptian rites.

She was not an Egyptian, but a Macedonian, and had to contend with the plotting of the Egyptian priests, who hated her usurping house; with (after Cæsar's death) the double-headed menace of Rome, under the rivals Antony and Octavius, who both desired the riches of Egypt; with the guileful ambition of Herod of Judea; and with the hatred of her sister Arsinoë.

Through this maze of hatred she had to guide Cæsarion, the young son she had borne to Cæsar, towards the throne of the world.

Cats of Egypt

The scene is a room in the palace of Queen Cleopatra VII, at Alexandria, on an evening of 41 B.C.

The play may be presented quite simply, against plain curtains, with or without the addition of pillars; or the setting may be as elaborate as is desired, in either the Egyptian or the Greek style. The latter would probably be the more correct, but the former will be the more effective, especially if it includes huge pillars, of conventional lotus or papyrus design, soaring above the line of vision of the audience, and serving to convey a suggestion of a tremendous destiny overshadowing the principal characters.

Back-stage centre is an opening of the curtains, or a pillared doorway, giving on to a terrace, and showing a large expanse of night sky. From the opening wide steps descend to stage level. Other entrances are right and left. The essential furniture is a light couch placed obliquely towards left, and a low table centre right on which are fruit, a large vessel of wine, and drinking-cups. One or two stools would help the effect.

Lighting might be from moonlight which floods the terrace, the steps, and the centre of the room, leaving the corners dim; or this might be assisted by two lamps, on pillars or tripods, up-stage to either side of the steps.

There should be, if possible, a few moments of Egyptian music, in a dark theatre, before the rise of the curtain. The rhythm of the music gives place to the regular, brutal swishing and thudding of a scourge, and a woman's scream, which dies into low moans.

As the curtain rises Charmion, an Egyptian woman of about twenty-seven, in Egyptian costume, is standing on the steps, erect and cold, dominating the scene. She has the spare beauty of an Egyptian statue, and all the dignity and authority of a high-born lady of a very ancient house. Iras, a Greek woman of about the same age, in Greek costume, is lying on the couch, idly fanning herself. In contrast with Charmion, she is gay, alluring, and a gossip. Down-stage centre Polyxena, a young female Greek slave, is lying on the floor, almost naked, her hands bound, her muscles tense with agony, her back covered with blood and crimson slashes. She is being scourged by Mitshere, a tall, sinewy, desert woman, dark-skinned and middle-aged. Mnesis and Sadhe, two young Egyptian girls, are standing together down-stage right. They are curious and a little frightened, but Charmion and Iras are quite indifferent to Polyxena's torture. Such things, even violent death, are commonplace to them. At the moment the curtain goes up the scourge has just descended, and is being swished upward again for a further blow. Before it can descend again, however, Polyxena cries out.

POLYXENA [*to Charmion*]. Ah-h! . . . Have mercy! . . .

I—I can bear no more. . . .

[*Charmion makes a curt gesture to Mitshere, who remains still, with the scourge raised.*

CHARMION [*coldly*]. You will speak now?

POLYXENA. I—will speak——

CHARMION [*to Mitshere*]. Enough! [*Mitshere lowers the scourge.*] See that you speak the truth, or, by the flail of Osiris, you shall be torn in pieces!

POLYXENA. Great lady, I—— [*Polyxena breaks off, sobbing. Charmion gestures again to Mitshere, who raises the*

scurge. Polyxena screams.] No, no! I will tell you all! I am the slave of the Queen of Cyprus——

CHARMION. The Queen of Egypt, Cleopatra the Great, is also Queen of Cyprus. You are not her slave. You are the slave of the Princess Arsinoë, who is not Queen of Cyprus, and will never be Queen of Egypt.

IRAS. For all her plotting.

POLYXENA [*passionately*]. Of the Princess Arsinoë, daughter of the divine Pharaoh——

CHARMION [*interrupting*]. Enough! We know the name of the accursed one. To your story!

POLYXENA. She is here in Alexandria——

IRAS [*reacting*]. Here? How dare she?

POLYXENA. There is——nothing——my lady will not dare——

IRAS. Well, she has run on the sword this time.

CHARMION. Where is she? [*Polyxena is silent. Charmion gestures to Mitshere, who menaces Polyxena with the scourge.*] Where is she?

POLYXENA. In the Temple of Isis.

IRAS. So close?

CHARMION. Her purpose? . . . Scarce the need to ask. Plotting and ever plotting, by her evil charms and by the power of her magic. The Queen will have no peace from her till she is dead. . . . What were her instructions to you? To infect the minds of men with her false tales? To poison the Queen's wine? To do harm to the Prince Cæsarion? [*Terribly*] Beware how you answer me, for I have the ancient knowledge that drags out truth.

POLYXENA [*weakly*]. I—I was sent by her to [*with a gasp*]—ah-h! . . .

[*Polyxena suddenly collapses.*]

CHARMION [*curtly, to Mnesis*]. Bring wine.

[*Mnesis pours wine into a cup and goes to Polyxena. Assisted by Mitshere, she drags Polyxena to*

her knees, and holds the cup for her to drink. Polyxena, shuddering, revives. Mitshere and Mnesis hold her upright between them. She hangs limply, continuing with difficulty.

POLYXENA. This is—no plot. I—I was sent to—seek audience of the Queen—for my mistress—

IRAS. We are likely to believe that.

CHARMION. No honest purpose is gained by a secret path.

POLYXENA [*with a show of spirit*]. How else could I have reached the Queen's ear? Through you?

CHARMION. You are lying to us, and you shall die—not easily.

POLYXENA [*desperately*]. By the tears of Isis, this is the truth! I came with a word for the ear of Queen Cleopatra.

IRAS. And what more than a word?

POLYXENA. No more than this. Princess Arsinoë desires to speak with the Queen, her sister. And you—and your like—bar the way. Therefore has she come secretly, in a merchant vessel, and has sent me to seek the Queen.

CHARMION. And she is in the Temple of Isis?

POLYXENA. Yes. The gods forgive me for telling you—you torturers! . . . Oh-h-h! [*Polyxena bursts into tears; then changes her tone to one of pleading.*] Let my lady see the Queen. Her errand is peaceful. . . . Egypt has all—and she has nothing—

CHARMION [*interrupting coldly, speaking to Mitshere*]. Take her away, and see that her guard is strict. We may need her tongue again—before she dies. [*Polyxena shudders, sagging limply as Mitshere and Mnesis take her off right. Charmion speaks to Sadhe, giving her a ring.*] Go to the Captain of the Guard. Bid him send men to search the Temple of Isis, find that woman, and bring her here! Be swift and secret!

[*Sadhe bows and goes off left.*

IRAS [*sitting up*]. You have a bitter tongue, Charmion.

CHARMION. For her—yes.

IRAS. Do not forget that “that woman,” as you call her, is full sister to the Queen.

CHARMION. And therefore deadlier enemy to her, and to her son. [*Reflectively*] Cleopatra—Arsinoë—the last of the children of old Ptolemy the Piper. . . . The members of their usurping house have ever loved murdering one another—it is their fate.

IRAS. Their fate to struggle for a throne.

CHARMION. One of them must needs kill the other. . . . But the one to be killed must not be our Queen.

IRAS [*lightly*]. Well, to be at loggerheads is not so far out of fashion. Rome herself has set them a good example, since Caius Julius [*laughing*—god self-made who could not make himself a king—was murdered.

CHARMION. Cæsar! They were fools to kill him, setting themselves a task not one of them can do—to rule the world.

IRAS [*rising*]. Mark Antony may. [*With appreciation*] He’s a proper man. I remember one night in Rome——

CHARMION [*interrupting contemptuously*]. Antony! An overgrown schoolboy, hen-pecked by his wife when she can get near him; a drunken pursuer of women; a play-actor; a circus-master. Your nights in Rome do not make masters of the world.

[*Irás laughs, moving across to Charmion, and touching her playfully with her fan.*]

IRAS. Ah, Charmion, ever cold and virtuous. You should have stayed in Rome among the vestals.

CHARMION [*tartly*]. Which *you* could not have done.

IRAS. And would not, anyway. [*Laughs.*] And, talking of masters of the world, our Cæsar was no saint.

CHARMION. Oh, Cæsar loved his pleasures—but he kept them in their proper place [*drily*]*—*more or less. Besides, Cæsar was an intelligence, while Antony will never be more than—a thirst.

IRAS [*suddenly glancing up-stage*]. Ssh!—

CHARMION. The Queen?

[*Charmion and Iras move down-stage centre, facing up to the terrace. Cleopatra enters from right of the terrace. She is quite small, beautifully made, a brunette, twenty-seven years of age. As well as being the Queen of Egypt and the mother of Cæsar's son, she is also, according to the belief of the day, a goddess—the earthly manifestation of Isis and Aphrodite—and is well capable of playing all these parts. But she is still young at heart, and beneath her dignity can frequently be seen the high-spirited girl who played so desperate a game, her life and kingdom at stake, with Cæsar. She is Greek, not Egyptian. Her costume would generally have been Greek, but for the sake of effect and contrast she might here be dressed as an Egyptian. She is followed by two young boy or girl slaves of equal height, with long-handled fans. Charmion and Iras make obeisance. Cleopatra pauses for a moment on the steps, the slaves standing behind her, their fans crossed behind her head.*

CLEOPATRA [*lightly*]. Do I hear the name of Antony?

CHARMION. O Queen, we were comparing him with the late Imperator—

CLEOPATRA [*laughing*]. To Antony's disadvantage, I hope.

IRAS. Charmion said that the divine Cæsar was an intelligence, while the lord Antony—

CLEOPATRA. Not yet divine——

CHARMION. But he has his aspirations.

IRAS. The lord Antony will never be more than—a thirst.

[*Cleopatra, Iras, and Charmion laugh. They have grown up together and are friends on informal occasions. Cleopatra moves down-stage to the couch. The slaves stand one to either side of the doorway back-stage, their fans held upright, looking straight before them, taking no interest in the conversation.*]

CLEOPATRA [*sitting*]. I too would speak of Antony——

CHARMION [*urgently*]. Madam! First there is another matter—and more urgent——

CLEOPATRA. More urgent than Antony? [*Laughing*] If you saw the letters he is for ever sending me——

CHARMION. A vital matter. The Princess Arsinoë is here—in Alexandria. [*Cleopatra reacts sharply.*]

CLEOPATRA. Arsinoë here?

CHARMION. We caught a slave of hers actually prowling within the walls, and thrashed her into confession——

CLEOPATRA. Where is Arsinoë?

CHARMION. In the Temple of Isis. We have sent guards to bring her here.

CLEOPATRA [*thoughtfully*]. She is brave, that young sister of mine. . . . I ought to have had her killed long since—but I cannot. [*Suddenly tense*] Why is she here?

CHARMION. Her slave had some false tale of seeking audience with you. [*Scornfully*] A peaceful audience.

CLEOPATRA. And you do not believe that, my Charmion?

CHARMION. Do you?

CLEOPATRA. No.

CHARMION. Let me give an order to the guards to kill her——

CLEOPATRA. No. I will hear what she has to say. It will be interesting to hear how she excuses her action in sending those ships of mine to help Cassius against Antony—and against my order.

CHARMION [*grimly*]. A matter for which *you* will have to answer to Antony. [*Cleopatra laughs. Charmion is indignant.*] Oh, you may laugh at it! I know you delight in perilous things, but—you'll have to convince Antony that——

[*Cleopatra laughingly waves Charmion to silence.*]

CLEOPATRA. So Antony has grown to a peril now? Well, perhaps—though I am scarce likely to essay a drinking-bout with him. . . . And mark this! He has somewhat to answer me. Why did he throw in his lot with that pimply-faced little rat Octavius?

CHARMION. Be serious, madam! You are so fond of forgetting that you are the Queen of Egypt——

CLEOPATRA [*mocking*]. Though no Egyptian.

CHARMION. No Egyptian. But Queen by all the ancient, sacred rights—Isis-Aphrodite! . . . [*Passionately*] Have I not served you as a Queen?

CLEOPATRA. Faithfully, despite my Greek blood. And despite the hatred of your priestly relations of Thebes, [*lightly*] who worship Amon in the dark, and make dark spells——

[*Charmion moves quickly to Cleopatra, dropping on her knees.*]

CHARMION [*passionately*]. You must not! How can you know the things you lightly say, who have not the ancient mysteries? Their magic is powerful, and they desire more than your death: they would utterly destroy the memory of you.

CLEOPATRA [*laughing*]. I do not think they will succeed in doing that—now.

IRAS [*casually*]. Let them plot. They are too old for strength, worn out with their heavy antiquity.

CHARMION. No! If you knew how *my* strength has gone to counter their plots . . . You know I was sent to you to kill you——

CLEOPATRA [*caressing Charmion's cheek*]. That was long ago.

CHARMION —and would not, because at once I loved you; because I knew you great above all the greatness of my own people; saw greatness for Egypt through you——

CLEOPATRA. I have not forgotten. You know that I am grateful.

CHARMION [*rising*]. Then show it by having more care of yourself.

CLEOPATRA [*lightly*]. Never fear. I love life too much to throw it away.

CHARMION. Yet you laugh at the priests of Egypt——

CLEOPATRA. Because they are so ridiculously serious.

CHARMION. You laugh at Antony——

CLEOPATRA. Oh, him? . . . I shall yet laugh *with* him.

CHARMION. And tolerate that—— [*Charmion breaks off*].

CLEOPATRA [*amused*]. That—what?

CHARMION [*stiffly*]. I speak of the Princess Arsinoë, who is quite capable of entering into any sort of villainy with the priests of Thebes.

CLEOPATRA. I know that.

CHARMION. And there is not only yourself. What of the Prince Cæsarion?

CLEOPATRA [*reacting*]. What?

CHARMION. You may laugh at your own danger. You will not laugh at his.

CLEOPATRA [*anxiously*]. Danger from Arsinoë—aye, truly! But she should be caught ere this! Why have they

not brought her here? [*To Iras*] How did you leave the Prince?

IRAS. He had been bathed, and was saying his prayers. By now he should be asleep. [*Cleopatra springs to her feet.*]

CLEOPATRA. I must see! I should have gone to him at once. Why have you kept me here with your idle chatter? He shall have swords about him——

IRAS. I will go——

CLEOPATRA. I must——

[Cleopatra runs quickly off right. Iras follows her. Charmion stands stiffly for a moment, then goes up-stage to the terrace, looking about her anxiously. One of the slaves yawns openly and relaxes, then the other. Charmion, returning, catches them before they can spring to attention again.]

CHARMION [*kindly*]. You are weary.

1ST SLAVE [*sleepily*]. No, lady—— [*Yawns.*]

CHARMION. You are. It is late for children. You may go to bed. I will excuse you to the Queen.

2ND SLAVE [*sleepily*]. Thank you, lady—— [*Yawns.*]

[The slaves spring to attention in salute of Charmion, who diffidently pats the cheek of one of them. They go off up the steps and to right of the terrace. Charmion paces to and fro uneasily.]

CHARMION [*aloud to herself*]. They should have brought that woman here long since. Isis grant she has not escaped them!

[After a moment Cleopatra returns right, followed by Iras, who carries a large tablet on which is roughly drawn a map of the ancient world.]

CLEOPATRA. Safely asleep; the good gods direct his dreams! He grows more like Cæsar every day. I've doubled

his guard, and Apollodorus is watching by him. [*Pauses centre, speaking very seriously.*] Apollodorus guards the most precious life in the world—the coming master of the whole world.

CHARMION. The son of the Queen of Egypt, and of Caius Julius Cæsar.

IRAS [*to Cleopatra*]. But Cæsar was never crowned—that was a mistake. And you should have been married to him by the Roman law——

CHARMION [*indignantly*]. Roman law? Pah! Those barbarians! The sacred rites of Egypt are enough.

CLEOPATRA [*sighing*]. Iras is right. It would have made our position secure. But Cæsar scoffed at opportunity and found a hedge of daggers. And now . . . [*Pause. Then with a sudden change of mood*] What of the Princess Arsinoë?

CHARMION. Nothing—yet.

CLEOPATRA. Laggards! We must flog a few of them, to teach them how to serve their Queen.

IRAS. The slave may have been lying.

CLEOPATRA. If Arsinoë is here it will go hard with any who let her through their fingers before I have had speech with her. . . . [*Looking up-stage*] Where are my fan-bearers?

CHARMION. They were tired, madam, and I sent them to bed.

[*Cleopatra immediately softens, turning to Charmion, smiling, and patting her cheek.*]

CLEOPATRA. For all that fierce virginity of yours, Charmion, you'd make an excellent mother.

CHARMION [*stiffly*]. I do not like men: I do not trust them.

CLEOPATRA [*chaffing*]. Not even Cæsar?

CHARMION. I admired Cæsar. I did not trust him. But he was almost a great man.

CLEOPATRA [*grimacing*]. Almost?

IRAS [*lightly*]. The man whom Charmion allows to be truly great will assuredly have to marry her.

[*Cleopatra and Iras laugh. Cleopatra goes to the couch and sits. Iras goes to the table, puts down the map, and pours wine into one of the cups. Meanwhile Charmion, angry, moves quickly upstage to the steps as if to run off, then swings round on the others.*

CHARMION. Iras! That tongue of yours will bring you trouble——

IRAS [*incorrigible*]. Ah, well, there are many ways for a woman to get into trouble—thank the gods!

[*Charmion draws herself up, blazing with anger, while Cleopatra and Iras stare at her, amused, not understanding her mood.*

CHARMION. Greatness? What do you know of greatness? You speak of Greece—of Rome—little powers spawned upon the world late in time. What are they to Egypt, who from the beginning of time has thrown her mighty shadow across the world?

CLEOPATRA [*lightly*]. Oh, Charmion, passionate Egyptian cat that you are! I thought you said a little while ago that you serve me—a Greek—because I am great beyond the greatness of Egypt.

CHARMION. Beyond Egypt's present greatness. . . . I look to you to give back to Egypt what she has lost, because you have the spirit of the olden times—and *because you are a woman.*

IRAS [*lightly, aside*]. Ah, of course! We were speaking of men.

CHARMION [*to Cleopatra, ignoring Iras*]. You are a Greek. Your country does not regard women as Egypt has ever

regarded them. In olden Egypt the royal women were not mere playthings for men; they had equal power—sometimes even greater honour——

IRAS. How pleasant for their husbands!

CHARMION. You have the spirit of the divine queens. I see you as great beyond all the *men* who strut about the world to-day.

CLEOPATRA. Thank you, Charmion.

IRAS. Charmion is wasted here. She ought to be a politician, waking up the sleepy senators at Rome.

CLEOPATRA [*good-naturedly*]. And you, Iras, are a baggage.

[*Iras takes the cup of wine to Cleopatra, laughing.*]

IRAS [*wickedly*]. So that, between the two of us, Charmion and I might make *one* successful queen.

[*Cleopatra and Iras laugh. Charmion has to forget her indignation and laugh with them.*]

CLEOPATRA. You hussy! Bring more wine. We'll drink a toast!

[*Iras pours two more cups of wine, taking one to Charmion, who has moved down-stage towards the couch.*]

IRAS [*in playful apology*]. Your pardon, Charmion—but you are so serious, and so much a—very—ancient—Egyptian—priestess sometimes.

CHARMION [*friendly again*]. I've need to be, since you will never be either.

[*Charmion is now a little above the couch, Iras standing centre and facing towards it. Cleopatra is sitting up, looking at them.*]

CLEOPATRA. To the power of Egypt over Rome! To the power of women over men [*proudly*—until the son I bore to Cæsar shall rule the world!

CHARMION. And Egypt's glory shall be again!

IRAS. And art and culture drive out barbarous war!

[They drink. As they do so Arsinoë enters stealthily from left of the terrace, and stands watching for a moment, unobserved by them, then draws back behind the edge of the opening, obviously concealing herself, listening. She is a fair-haired, beautiful girl of about twenty-three, in a short Greek dress which leaves her legs free, and a light cloak with a hood for quick disguise.]

CLEOPATRA. A great desire! And now to make it good. Bring me that map.

[Iras takes the cups back to the table. Charmion fetches the map, gives it to Cleopatra, and stands just behind her. Iras returns and stands beside Charmion, both bending over Cleopatra from behind, looking at the map.]

Now! Here is Philippi, where Antony beat Brutus and Cassius. Here is Rome *[grimacing]*—I never did like Rome. . . . Those pompous matrons—cows, all of them; humourless, self-satisfied cows!

CHARMION. And their morals are atrocious.

CLEOPATRA. Well, Octavius has Rome. He has taken the West, and Antony's taken the East—here! He is living like a lord of the earth at Tarsus. And here are we—

IRAS *[mischievously]*. Talking of Octavius, have you heard that he singes the hairs of his legs with hot nutshells, to make them grow? *[Cleopatra laughs.]* And that his mother and sister make all his clothes for him?

[Cleopatra and Iras laugh. Despite her disapproval, Charmion has to smile.]

CLEOPATRA. I can well believe all of it. Unpleasant little reptile!

CHARMION. Yes, a reptile—a dangerous reptile! He will

creep and crawl towards the goal of his purpose, while Antony, who could easily outpace him if he were not a fool, sits and laughs among his wine-cups and his wenches.

CLEOPATRA. Well, this is our position: Octavius here, Antony there—oh, and here is Herod of Judea——

[Arsinoë again appears briefly, listening, still unobserved by them, and again conceals herself.]

CHARMION. The best man of all of them.

CLEOPATRA. But he dotes upon that wife of his—Mariamne. Besides, he hates me——

CHARMION. And is not strong enough to help us.

IRAS. Antony's not in love with *his* wife, that's certain. A termagant, if ever there was one——

CLEOPATRA. Stop gossiping, Iras, and listen! It is but a matter of time before one of them attacks Egypt.

CHARMION. Yes. With our riches and our corn we are a standing temptation to them.

CLEOPATRA. Egypt, by herself, cannot fight Rome.

CHARMION. Oh, for the days when Egypt was great!

CLEOPATRA. We must be great again, Charmion.

CHARMION. A woman—and a young boy—against the world. . . .

[Cleopatra throws down the map, rises, and paces to and fro, Charmion and Iras watching her.]

CLEOPATRA. When I—no more than a schoolgirl—went to Cæsar in that bale of carpet to win back my kingdom from Arsinoë and that treacherous eunuch I did not fail in my task, desperate though it was——

CHARMION. But Cæsar is dead——

CLEOPATRA. He is dead—the greatest man in the world—but that must not mean the end of the world. *[Proudly]* His work remains; his purpose remains; and his son remains, to sit upon the throne of the world.

[Iras runs to Cleopatra, drops on her knees, and kisses Cleopatra's hand.]

IRAS. When you look like that, you are indeed more than queen—Isis-Aphrodite manifest on earth!

[Cleopatra draws Iras to her feet, holding her hands.]

CLEOPATRA. I have the beginning of a plan. . . .

IRAS *[excitedly]*. Tell us!

CLEOPATRA. It will need your help—

[Pauses, thoughtfully.]

CHARMION *[dubiously]*. I have thought until my head aches with thinking, but I can only see the menace of Antony and his legions—the menace of Octavius and his legions—the menace of Arsinoë and her followers—and the black hatred of olden Egypt: priestly hatred—of magic and curses on your house, and of evil that has been growing since the dawn of time—

IRAS *[shivering]*. Charmion! It is ill-omened—

CLEOPATRA *[laughing]*. It will be a game, Charmion—a great game! The greatest game of life!

CHARMION. With too much of death in the stakes.

CLEOPATRA. Death? If we are to think of life we have no traffic with death. I tell you— *[Pausing, and looking left]* Who is this? *[Sadhe enters swiftly left, prostrating herself. Arsinoë is hidden.]* Well?

SADHE. O Queen, the Princess Arsinoë is not to be found!

CHARMION *[fiercely]*. The fools!

SADHE *[rising]*. Neither in the Temple of Isis, nor in the city. It is thought she has escaped to a ship—

IRAS. Or that slave lied.

CLEOPATRA *[rapidly]*. Have out more soldiers—a dozen companies, if need be! Comb the city and the harbours! Search all the vessels; let none pass out! Send to the guards at all the gates—no one shall leave the city!

CHARMION There will be a reckoning for this——

SADHE. A close watch has been set, O Queen!

[*Sadhe returns the ring to Charmion.*]

CLEOPATRA. Go, Charmion—direct these imbeciles! You, Iras, to the Prince with Apollodorus——

CHARMION. And you, madam?

CLEOPATRA. I will stay here. Bring my sister to me if she is found. We will speak again of the other matters. . . .

[*Charmion and Iras bow and go off quickly, Charmion left, and Iras right. Sadhe rises, bows, and follows Charmion. Cleopatra stands quite still centre, facing down-stage, for a long moment. Arsinoë moves into sight and stands on the steps behind her, also quite still, her hood thrown back from her head. Then Cleopatra senses Arsinoë's presence, and swings round, facing up-stage.*]

Arsinoë!

ARSINOË [*mocking*]. Well, Cleopatra, my sister, whose guards cannot keep out unwelcome visitors——

CLEOPATRA. The guard who let you past shall die.

ARSINOË [*casually*]. He is dead already. [*Taking a dagger from the belt of her tunic and handling it reflectively*] A man who can let a woman kill him is no loss to you.

CLEOPATRA [*coldly*]. What do you want?

ARSINOË. To speak with you.

CLEOPATRA. Oh, is that all? I thought you might want to kill me too.

ARSINOË [*laughing*]. The usual desire of the children of Ptolemy. . . . No, I don't want to kill you—at present. [*With a note of menace*] But if you make the least attempt to call for help I shall have to.

CLEOPATRA. You would die before you could boast of it.

ARSINOË. I think not. With you out of the way I should

be the last of our house, since you thoughtlessly murdered our brothers——

CLEOPATRA [*indifferently*]. I did not murder them.

ARSINOË. No matter, they are dead. And I think—in all modesty, sister—that the priests of Egypt would rather have me than you, so that if I *were* the last——

[*Arsinoë pauses significantly; then shrugs, puts away her dagger, and saunters easily down-stage to the table right.*]

CLEOPATRA. You little fool! You draw the steel to your own throat. You admit conspiracy with those dark sorcerers of Thebes——

ARSINOË. Do you mind if I have some wine? I have been without food since noon. [*Cleopatra does not reply. Arsinoë pours herself a cup of wine, raising the cup to Cleopatra.*] To our better friendship, sister!

CLEOPATRA. Friendship?

ARSINOË. Love, then.

[*Arsinoë drinks and puts down the cup.*]

CLEOPATRA. What new mischief are you plotting. Time and again I have spared your life when it was in my hands. Time and again you have attempted mine—and you dare to talk of love between us! What now?

[*Arsinoë moves to Cleopatra.*]

ARSINOË. You are in a difficult position, sister. Octavius is the devil, and Antony is the deep sea—and you are between them.

CLEOPATRA. Do I need you to teach me that?

ARSINOË. You are not safe, and *I* am not satisfied. I want more than the barren crown of Cyprus——

CLEOPATRA. You have not the crown of Cyprus. . . . And I shall have the head of that traitor servant of yours who dared to use my ships and my men to help my enemies——

ARSINOË. By my orders.

CLEOPATRA. Remember that *your* hold on life is none too strong!

ARSINOË [*her hand to the dagger, suggestively*]. Stronger, at the moment, than yours. . . . But enough! I have not come to quarrel——

CLEOPATRA. What, then?

ARSINOË. I come to propose an alliance between us.

CLEOPATRA [*reacting*]. You—so full of deceit and plottings as you are——

ARSINOË. Let us join forces to stand against Rome.

CLEOPATRA. The scheme of a madcap girl! And what forces could you bring? Your ships and men are already mine.

ARSINOË [*mocking*]. Are they? They would follow me against you.

CLEOPATRA [*furiously*]. Oh! . . .

[*Cleopatra is about to clap her hands to summon assistance. Arsinoë catches her by the shoulder.*]

ARSINOË. Remember! Unless you would forget for ever. . . .

CLEOPATRA [*shaking her off*]. You dare to threaten me? And expect to live after?

ARSINOË. But I do not want to threaten you. We have hated each other too long; it is a legacy we should have forgotten. You are against Rome, and I—against the world. Why should we throw away strength for hatred? [*Cleopatra regards Arsinoë angrily. There is a slight pause.*] In olden Egypt brother and sister were co-regnant. Why not *sister* and sister?

CLEOPATRA. So that is it? And a fine bargain for me! For a promised aid that cannot exist you want half the throne of Egypt? Well, sister, I should not have thought that even *your effrontery* would reach so far.

ARSINOË [*dangerously*]. Have a care!

CLEOPATRA [*ignoring the interruption*]. And you forget one thing—my son, Cæsarion.

ARSINOË [*contemptuously*]. A Roman bastard! The son of that bald-headed old adulterer who thought himself a god—

[*Cleopatra furiously slaps Arsinoë's face. Arsinoë recoils, her hand to her dagger.*]

CLEOPATRA [*passionately*]. Cæsar was a man above men! I was *married* to him! Our son is heir to Rome and Egypt—to the world! And you—you *dare*—

[*Arsinoë laughs bitterly. The following lines are very rapidly spoken.*]

ARSINOË. Yes, you are the same sister who let me walk in his triumph—

CLEOPATRA. I was fool enough to try to save you—

ARSINOË. Me—a maid of eighteen—exposed to the ridicule, the filth and shame, of Rome.

CLEOPATRA. Go, quickly! And never let me see you again, or, by Serapis, you shall die!

ARSINOË. I should have died then. Often I have wondered why I did not, for what maid could support such dishonour and live? But now I know why I did not. I had work to do—

CLEOPATRA. I warn you to go!

ARSINOË. I came here in peace—

CLEOPATRA. In treachery!

ARSINOË. You force me to war!

[*Arsinoë snatches out her dagger. For a moment they face each other tensely.*]

CLEOPATRA. I shall give you but one more chance—
[*bitterly*] sister.

ARSINOË. It is too late for you to give me even that—
sister.

[*Arsinoë runs upon Cleopatra with the dagger raised. Cleopatra deftly evades her, moves to the table, snatches up the wine-vessel and throws it off right, from where a loud crash is heard.*

CLEOPATRA [*coolly*]. Now go, for my women will be here——

[*Arsinoë springs on Cleopatra, who catches her right arm. For a moment they struggle, then Iras runs on right, reacting violently.*

IRAS [*shouting*]. Ah-h! Help!

[*Iras runs to Cleopatra's assistance. Together they succeed in holding Arsinoë. Charmion runs on left, followed by Sadhe. Mitshere runs on right. Charmion twists the dagger from Arsinoë's hand, drawing a gasp of pain from her. Mitshere and Sadhe grip Arsinoë's hands, forcing her arms behind her. Cleopatra and Iras move away from her. Cleopatra stands on the steps above the others. Charmion faces Arsinoë, who stands defiantly between her captors.*

CLEOPATRA [*calmly*]. Thank you.

IRAS [*shaken*]. Ah—madam! I will call the guard——

[*Iras moves towards the entrance left.*

CLEOPATRA. No. Wait awhile——

CHARMION. How came she here?

CLEOPATRA. By killing one of the soldiers.

CHARMION. To murder you.

CLEOPATRA [*calmly*]. Not murder. There are no murders in war.

ARSINOË. If you are going to kill me be swift with it.

CHARMION [*to Arsinoë*]. Beware how you address the Queen. . . . I do not think your death should be swift.

ARSINOË. Oh, I've no doubt I should get torture enough were I left in your hands. But even my sister—[*sneering*] would-be Queen of kings and mistress of the world—would scarce have the inhumanity to turn me over to you.

CLEOPATRA. If you were in my place, and I in yours, what would you do to me, Arsinoë?

ARSINOË. Kill you. It seems there is room in the world for only one of us. But I should not torture you.

CLEOPATRA. Well, I shall not even kill you—this time.

[*All the others react.*]

IRAS. What!

CHARMION. But—this is madness! Having got her——

ARSINOË [*passionately*]. I will not be imprisoned—shut away from the sun! Give me death, rather!

CLEOPATRA [*curtly*]. You are free to go, sister.

CHARMION. Madam, you must not! Do you not see that she will ever be a death to stalk in your footsteps?

IRAS. She is not to be trusted.

[*Cleopatra gestures them to silence.*]

CLEOPATRA. Arsinoë, I am giving you back your life for this reason: when I triumphed with Cæsar——

ARSINOË [*interrupting contemptuously*]. A brief triumph!

CLEOPATRA [*angrily*]. Do not drive me too far! [*Recovering herself*] I say, when I triumphed with Cæsar in Rome you walked in golden chains. The fault was your own—you plotted against me, and you were on the losing side—but I have not forgotten how you looked as you faced that obscene mob, and—and so——

CHARMION [*interrupting angrily*]. A queen should not allow softness of heart to guide her.

CLEOPATRA [*ignoring Charmion*]. And so I am giving you your life—when you have justly forfeited it—to wash out the memory of that day. [*Pause: silence. Arsinoë remains*

quite still, proud and cold. Then Cleopatra continues calmly]
But if our paths meet in hatred again; if you dare conspire against me once more; if you try to suborn my people—I shall kill you.

CHARMION. Then you will kill her soon—[*aside*] if she does not kill you first.

ARSINOË [*calmly, to Cleopatra*]. You are very sure of your strength, but how will you stand, hated by Egypt, with Rome against you? No longer have you the protection of Cæsar's toga. . . . Better have listened to my plan. Two of us together on the throne—two to rule, to be strong——

CLEOPATRA [*interrupting curtly, speaking to Sadhe*]. Get a file of guards to take her to the harbour. Take also her slave. Set them aboard their vessel. Bid the captain lose no time in departing if he would keep his head! [*Giving Sadhe a ring from her finger*] Here is your authority.

[*For a moment Arsinoë looks straight at Cleopatra. There is a great deal in the look, because they know very well that one of them will kill the other. Then Arsinoë turns away and goes off proudly, up the steps and to left of the terrace, between Sadhe and Mitshe. After they have gone Cleopatra sighs.*]

CHARMION. Madam! I protest——

CLEOPATRA [*stopping her with a gesture*]. Have you ever condemned to death—a sister—Charmion?

CHARMION. I would were it necessary——

IRAS. As this is——

CLEOPATRA [*sadly*]. She is a brave child. It is a pity that the world cannot be wide enough for the two of us. I could have loved her. . . . But we are too proud—both of us. And I have Cæsar's son—— [*Mnesis enters right and prostrates herself*]. What is it?

MNESIS. O Queen, the noble Roman Quintus Dellius is here as envoy——

IRAS. Ah!

MNESIS. —of Marcus Antonius, Consul of Rome——

CHARMION [*sharply*]. From Antony!

[*Cleopatra has drawn herself erect.*

MNESIS. He has but now arrived from Tarsus, and though the hour is late he craves an audience, for his business is urgent.

CLEOPATRA [*to Mnesis*]. Tell the noble Quintus Dellius that the Queen of Egypt will receive him. [*Mnesis rises, makes obeisance, and backs off right. Cleopatra speaks to Charmion and Iras.*] He has come at a ripe moment.

IRAS. You have ignored so many of Antony's messages——

CLEOPATRA [*with spirit*]. Of course I ignored them! Am I one of the petty princelings, to run and fawn upon the hand of this inflated conqueror at his first word?

IRAS [*dryly*]. Or even his second.

CHARMION. And now?

CLEOPATRA. Once I went to Cæsar, to recover a kingdom. Now, lest I lose it again——

CHARMION [*tensely*]. You will go to Antony?

CLEOPATRA. That was the purpose of which I spoke.

CHARMION. Oh! . . . But consider, madam! He is too gross for you. He is earth to choke your flame. [*Significantly*] And there is but one way to win his aid and break his alliance with Octavius——

IRAS. Your beauty . . .

CLEOPATRA [*lightly*]. And a nice display of the riches of Egypt.

CHARMION. Have you thought that you may pay too high a price, even for the throne of the world? Antony is not Cæsar——

CLEOPATRA [*suddenly angry*]. Must you tell me that? Had I Cæsar what should I want with such as Antony?

CHARMION. Madam——

CLEOPATRA [*stopping her*]. He is the least of the evils now besetting us. We must have the strength of his legions. . . . For the rest, well—[*recklessly*] he is a man, and I am beautiful——

CHARMION [*desperately*]. In all the world is there no other way?

CLEOPATRA [*with authority*]. Enough, Charmion! I tell you I have Cæsar's son! [*Slight, tense pause. Then Cleopatra continues.*] Go to the women! Have out the robes of state, the double crown of Egypt! . . . We will hear more of this Mark Antony.

[*Charmion and Iras, awed, bow and go off right, leaving Cleopatra standing on the steps, very still, very erect, and very much alone.*]

SLOW CURTAIN

Nocturne

By Vera I. Arlett

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CHARACTERS

THE MAN ON THE SEAT

THE BOY

THE YOUNG MAN

THE WOMAN

THE POLICEMAN

Applications regarding amateur performances of this play should be addressed to Messrs Samuel French, Ltd., 26 Southampton Street, Strand, London, W C 2, or 25 West 45th Street, New York

Nocturne

It is midsummer. The Embankment looks beautiful, for there is a blue dusk instead of the black of night. It is very late; stars are showing and distant lights.

There is a seat visible. In one corner of it a man is huddled up. We cannot see very plainly, but his outline suggests extreme poverty, and either illness or despair. At the other end of the seat, shrinking into herself, is a woman who looks equally unfortunate.

A policeman comes up and flashes his light on the man.

POLICEMAN. Nah, then. You been here long enough. Move on.

[The man struggles to his feet, stifles a cough, and moves off into the night. The policeman then turns his light on the woman, who starts to her feet, nervous and self-conscious.]

You'd better get along too.

WOMAN. Yes—yes. I'm just going.

POLICEMAN [*detaining her*]. Just a minute. I recognize you. You report at our station with the aliens, don't you?

WOMAN. Yes.

POLICEMAN. At least, you ought to. You should have come up yesterday with the rest, and you didn't. Why not?

WOMAN. Really . . . I assure you, it's quite all right. I—I lost my husband recently, and I've been down on my luck.

POLICEMAN. That's no reason for you to stop reporting. Refugees, weren't you?

WOMAN. Yes. But I was born a British subject. Can't you tell by my voice?

POLICEMAN. I can, and I'm sorry to see you mixed up with a lot of undesirable aliens. After all, you've lived abroad longer than you've lived here. Haven't you got a home?

WOMAN. Well—a room. It's terribly hot and stuffy on a night like this.

POLICEMAN. Loitering and hanging about won't do you any good, all the same. You get along, and report in the morning.

WOMAN. Yes, I will. Good night.

POLICEMAN. Good night.

[She disappears. He flashes his light round, and then resumes his beat and disappears too.]

Presently the man comes back and, finding the coast clear, settles into his corner again. After a few preliminary coughs he turns his coat collar up, and prepares to make the best of it.

The sound of cheerful whistling is heard, and a boy comes into sight. He walks jauntily, with hands in pockets and head well thrown back. Light glows a little round the seat with a soft intensity. It may be moonlight, or some light that the boy has brought with him.

BOY. Good evening.

MAN *[not encouraging]*. Good evening.

BOY. May I sit down?

MAN. I can't stop you.

BOY *[seating himself]*. Thanks very much for the kind invitation.

MAN. Don't mention it.

BOY. You don't really mind my sitting here, do you?

MAN. It's public property. I don't believe in private

ownership myself—for a very good reason. Circumstances have conspired to prevent my owning anything.

BOY. Bad luck.

MAN. I wonder.

BOY. Are you going to stay here all night?

MAN. Must you talk?

BOY. Yes.

MAN. My God.

BOY. You mean you don't want me to?

MAN. Do you expect answers?

BOY. Not necessarily.

MAN. Oh, I may stay a little longer then, if Robert doesn't return, or I don't drown myself.

BOY. I say! You weren't really thinking of doing that, were you?

MAN. Not until you came along. You just put the idea into my head somehow. But on the whole I think it would be superfluous.

BOY. I can see you aren't serious about it—are you?

MAN [*politely*]. Oh, no.

BOY. May I tell you something?

MAN. You probably will anyhow.

BOY. Shall I tell you why I'm here to-night?

MAN. Well, why are you?

BOY. Because I've run away from home. [*Proudly*] Yes, I have—really! I only arrived here this evening; walked every step of the way. To-morrow I shall look for work.

MAN. May you find it!

BOY. I shall have my ups and downs, of course. But I shall make good in time. I intend to. It's my ambition to be rich and powerful—and then I can do so much. For instance——

MAN. Here, stop. How old are you?

BOY. Fifteen.

[*Man whistles.*]

MAN. That's rather young to take the world on single-handed, isn't it?

BOY. But what else could I do? I *hate* my people. They aren't really my people; they just brought me up for money—and they were careful not to put any love into the bargain, either. Curse the lot of them!

MAN. Then who *are* your people?

BOY. That's just it. I don't know. I don't know who I am or where I came from. Sometimes I think I'm not even English. Don't you notice how dark and foreign-looking I am? You are too. That's why I felt I could talk to you.

MAN. But why have you cut yourself adrift like this?

BOY. Do you know what they were trying to make me?

MAN. No.

BOY. A grocer's assistant! Well, could I stand it? Could you see me slicing the streaky till I'm bald and pink, like my so-called father? He *is* a little brute, too. So I've cut and run.

MAN. You little fool! You utter little fool!

BOY. Why? I thought you'd sympathize. I'm jolly sure no one would make a grocer's assistant out of *you*. Anyhow, promise not to split.

MAN. I promise.

BOY. Swear.

MAN. Confound it, you young Hamlet! All right, then. Cross hands on heart, and wish I may die if I do!

BOY [*solemnly*]. Thank you. . . . You see, I haven't waited long. I only left school last year. I hated it; but, of course, they teach you to *read*.

MAN. You read?

BOY. Of course. Everything I can get hold of. I can live in books, and forget outside things—when they aren't too good.

MAN. Better and better—or perhaps I should say worse and worse.

BOY. Why?

MAN. I begin to see that you possess something that is going to make you very unhappy later on.

BOY. What is it?

MAN. Never mind.

BOY. Oh, I never worry about the future. I don't mind roughing it and getting knocked about a bit at first. I've got the guts to stand it. There are heaps of adventures to be had still if you aren't afraid to look for them. [*Apologetically*] I didn't mean to swank, you know. I just mean I'm not the stodgy sort.

MAN. So I see. You have sensitiveness and imagination. God help you! . . . But He probably won't.

BOY [*heedless*]. Oh, I don't know how to wait for morning! I couldn't sleep a wink if I tried. To think I'm free—free at last! You can't imagine how I've been hating everything and everybody lately. And now I feel quite different. Oh, why isn't it morning?

MAN. It seems to be night much more often somehow.

BOY [*getting up and pacing*]. You wouldn't really hold me back, would you?

MAN. Only because of the future——

BOY [*airily*]. Oh, devil take the future!

MAN. He probably will. [*Coughs and leans back, exhausted*].

BOY. I say, you have got a rotten cough! Have a bull's-eye?

MAN. No, thanks. It'll pass. . . . It's something I picked up in the War. Gassed, you know.

BOY. How absolutely ghastly! The thought of war simply sickens me. It always did.

MAN. It did me too.

BOY. Well, I'm going. I'm so excited I just can't be quiet, so I'll leave you in peace. Good-bye.

MAN. Good-bye, and good luck; but I expect you manage to miss it. By the way, what's your name?

BOY [*over his shoulder as he walks away*]. John Francis.

[*The light dims*]

MAN [*starting to his feet*]. Come back, come back! You mad fool, come back!

[*He is too spent to follow, and sinks down again exhausted and gasping. He buries his head in his hands. Presently a young man saunters into sight, and the light glows again.*]

YOUNG MAN. Do you mind my sitting here?

MAN. Good heavens, no. I had an idea I might be solitary, but I believe Piccadilly would be less frequented.

YOUNG MAN. Really?

MAN. Are you going to tell me the story of your life too?

YOUNG MAN. God forbid! Whoever has ventured to do that?

MAN. Just a fool of a boy who was here a few minutes ago.

YOUNG MAN. Oh, yes. I met him coming away.

MAN [*shivering, and pulling his shabby coat round him*]. It's cold. . . . Strange how cold even a summer night can get.

YOUNG MAN. And lonely—utterly lonely and mysterious. Like death.

MAN. Shut up.

YOUNG MAN. Death that comes in youth, beautifully, unexpectedly, yet inevitably, before the heart grows hard, and the tongue insincere.

MAN. Will you be quiet?

YOUNG MAN. I must put all that into a sonnet.

MAN. Don't.

YOUNG MAN. Why not?

"Some one has done it before, and done it better.
when I see a man about to write poetry in common
I try to save him.

YOUNG MAN. From what?

MAN. Himself, principally. Next, from sorrow like death
pain like hell. And lastly, my friend, from the deaf, blind
world.

YOUNG MAN. You are melancholy. You should make a
poet yourself.

MAN. Don't be a damned fool.

YOUNG MAN [*laughingly*]. Oh, I'm not offended! Neither
do you. Poets generally recognize each other. They must
have secret signs—like freemasons.

MAN. I see you are young and still troubled with ideals and
illusions. But life will smash them up for you presently, and
you too, unless you conform to the world's standards. Be a
worldling; be blind; be prosperous; eat and be full; and for-
get yesterday and to-morrow. Then call your beast-like state
happiness.

YOUNG MAN. Great heavens! You *are* disillusioned! You
know, that's one of the worst features of you middle-aged
and elderly people. Not content with all the physical ailments
you've got to discuss, you indulge in a number of mental ones
which are even worse. Obviously *you* have a kind of dys-
pepsia of the soul.

MAN. No doubt. I believe the other kind is brought on by
eating too much. I could hardly suffer from *that*.

YOUNG MAN. You are discouraging.

MAN. I mean to be.

YOUNG MAN. Well, well. I see what it is. You've lost
hope, and that's bad. I know I'm lucky because [*moving a
little closer, confidentially*] however much life may disappoint
me, or people let me down, there's one person in whom I can

have absolute faith and trust, and she never can—and never will—destroy them!

MAN. I knew it! *You're* going confidential on me too!

YOUNG MAN. But I must just tell you——

MAN. The oldest story there is. You've met the most wonderful girl in the world, haven't you?

YOUNG MAN. Yes. How did you know?

MAN. My God! This finishes it.

YOUNG MAN. What?

MAN. The tissue of lies you're believing in—the state of imbecility you're living in. You'll find yourself in the middle of an awful crash one of these days.

YOUNG MAN. Nonsense! I'm perfectly able to take care of myself and meet anything that comes.

MAN. Oh, go away. Let me die in peace.

YOUNG MAN. Die?

MAN. I assure you I had serious thoughts of drowning myself until you came along and burred. That put it out of my mind for a few minutes. Now the idea is coming back.

YOUNG MAN. I see, it's just your rather morbid form of humour. But I must tell you—she *is* all I think her.

MAN. Don't trust her.

YOUNG MAN. I should doubt God if she failed me.

MAN. One day you might even do that.

YOUNG MAN. Listen. It's like this:

“She is what my heart first awaking
Whispered the world was; morning light is she.”

[There is a moment's pause.]

Well, have you given up reading poetry as well as writing it?

MAN. Why did you remind me of *that*?

YOUNG MAN. Because it's so apt. It's so exactly—Lucy. Do you remember any more?

MAN.

“Heartless she is, as the shadow in the meadows
Flying to the hills on a blue and breezy noon.
No, she is athirst, and drinking up her wonder.
Earth to her is young as the slip of the new moon.”

YOUNG MAN [*getting up and stretching*]. I must go. I'm going to meet her now—in the garden that slopes down to the river. We call it the young Thames. It's a quiet, innocent river that doesn't know it's destined to pass through London.

MAN. Ignorance is merciful. Nothing and nobody knows what they're destined to pass through in the future.

YOUNG MAN. “Earth to her is young as the slip of the new moon.” Yes. It might have been written for Lucy.

MAN. Love is rarely original. Lovers are the only people who are allowed to tell the same tale twice without its being taken as a sign of age. Love is the most imitative of all the arts.

YOUNG MAN. Why, you're getting quite expansive!

MAN. Good night.

YOUNG MAN. Perhaps we shall meet again?

MAN. I doubt it. What's your name?

YOUNG MAN [*over his shoulder as he walks away*]. John Francis.

[*The light dims.*]

MAN [*starting up and calling*]. Come back, come back! Don't meet her, don't go to her, don't trust her! Don't believe in her, I tell you!

[*He sinks down again, shivering and collapsed. He tries to get comfortable in his corner, coughing and gasping. At last he wriggles himself into a new position, huddled and almost indistinguishable. The light glows again. The young man returns from*

the direction in which he went. He is walking slowly, and his eyes are bent on a book, for he reads as he walks. From the opposite direction comes a young girl, about eighteen. She wears, or carries, a shady garden hat, and is dressed in one of those dateless white summer dresses that always seem to suggest youth and gardens. Suddenly the young man raises his eyes, sees her, and gives a start.

LUCY. Oh, you *are* studious! What are you reading?

YOUNG MAN [*nervously*]. Nothing. Er—nothing important, I mean. [*Tries to stuff the book into a pocket.*]

LUCY. Don't do that. It'll spoil the shape of your clothes. [*He obediently retrieves it.*] Have you always got a book in your pocket?

YOUNG MAN. Mostly, I'm afraid.

LUCY. Oh, well, Father won't mind; and it's better than white mice. Do you know, Father's last secretary kept white mice? They always emerged from his pockets at the wrong moment.

YOUNG MAN. How unfortunate.

LUCY. Yes, wasn't it? But I rather enjoyed it—only Mother is trying so hard to stop me from giggling when things like that happen. She says a lady would ignore them. But I think it's awfully dull to keep on ignoring the things that make you laugh, don't you?

YOUNG MAN. Oh, rather!

LUCY. I *love* being amused. But really the young man was quite impossible. He had a flair for unusual pets; not only white mice. He kept grubs and caterpillars too—in match-boxes. Father offered one to Lord Wesifield by mistake, and he thought some one had done it on purpose, and was furious. So was Father. So was Mother.

YOUNG MAN. And I suppose you laughed?

LUCY. Well, yes, I'm afraid I did. So *he* had to go, and really I wasn't sorry. I simply couldn't stand him.

YOUNG MAN. Oh, poor chap! I do hope I have better luck.

LUCY. Anyhow, *you* appear to have a mind above white mice. I'd much rather you thought about books. I *love* books too. You must tell me what you were reading?

YOUNG MAN. As a matter of fact—it was—I mean——

LUCY. Don't tell me if you don't want to. I'm always being scolded for curiosity, but I love finding out about things. Father and Mother say I'm always asking "Why?" and they think it's good for me not to be answered; so you needn't answer me if you don't want to.

YOUNG MAN [*with feeling*]. But I *do* want to—very much. This is—a book of poems—er—love poems.

LUCY [*moving closer to him*]. I adore poetry. May I look? What's it called?

YOUNG MAN. *Poems and Ballads*, by Swinburne.

LUCY. I've never read them. Do you like them?

YOUNG MAN. Yes—oh, yes.

LUCY. Why?

YOUNG MAN. Well—they're very *expressive*.

LUCY. Oh. Will you lend them to me?

YOUNG MAN. Of course. That is, if your mother doesn't mind.

LUCY. *She* won't know. People never give me poetry books, and somehow I never think of buying them for myself. . . . Which poem were you reading?

YOUNG MAN [*turning over pages*]. One of the short ones. It's called *A Match*. Here it is.

LUCY [*looking over his shoulder*]. Oh, I know *that*. I'm sure I've read it somewhere or other. It's beautiful. [*Reads.*]

"If love were what the rose is,
And I were like the leaf——"

YOUNG MAN [*enthralled*]. But look at *this* verse:

"If you were life, my darling,
And I your love were death——"

LUCY. No. I don't care for that word 'death.' It's like a sudden cloud, or night falling too early. And the rest of the poem is so happy. [*Pointing*] That's my favourite verse.

"If you were April's lady,
And I were lord in May——"

YOUNG MAN. I—I believe it's mine too.

"Till day like night were shady
And night were bright like day;
If you were April's lady,
And I were lord in May."

[*He closes the book. They look at each other.*]

I believe it was written for you—April's lady!

LUCY. Oh, I do like poetry! Can't we find another?

YOUNG MAN. May I—please may I—give you the book?

LUCY. But I've just said no one ever gives me poetry books! How dreadful of me! It sounds like a hint now. I *will* say things first and think about them afterwards! I'm always being told, but I forget.

YOUNG MAN. It's only a *small* book.

LUCY. And I *do* like Swinburne. [*Sighs.*] I like him lots better than Milton. I had Milton for a prize once, but I could never finish *Paradise Lost*. Wasn't it awful of me? I got stuck in the hell part. I hate things about hell, and I hate horrors too. Do you?

YOUNG MAN. Yes. I'm afraid I do.

LUCY. I do, *frightfully*. Oh, dear, I'm talking too much

again. I *should* get into trouble if they found out. But, do you know, you are *very* easy to talk to?

YOUNG MAN. Do you know—you are very lonely?

LUCY [*hesitatingly*]. I—I believe you're right. I *am* lonely.

YOUNG MAN. Here's a friend for you. [*Gives book.*] Do keep it. [*With a rush*] And if you were to keep it always I should feel so——

LUCY. So what?

YOUNG MAN [*lamely*]. Pleased. [*Looks at her, then looks away, and speaks with another rush.*] Oh, more pleased than you could possibly guess!

LUCY. Why? [*He doesn't look round.*] Bother. I've said "Why" again. Never mind; don't be cross. And don't bother to answer. Just write my name. [*Opens book.*]

YOUNG MAN [*turning and taking it*]. What shall I put? I don't even know all your names, Miss Anstruther.

LUCY. Don't write 'Miss' anything. That would spoil it. I'm Lucy.

YOUNG MAN. Lucy. May I put that in too?

LUCY. Of course. Just 'Lucy.'

YOUNG MAN [*writing*]. "To Lucy, because she is April's lady."

LUCY. That's lovely. Now who it's from.

YOUNG MAN. That's not in the least important. But I'll put the initials in the corner, if you like. There. "From L. M."

LUCY. But your initials are J. F., for John Francis.

YOUNG MAN. Ah, that's a secret between you and me. L. M. stands for "Lord in May"—perhaps.

LUCY [*taking book*]. I see. Yes . . . a secret. I'll keep it.

YOUNG MAN [*moving closer*]. You make me want to write poems about you.

LUCY [*looking up*]. Do you write poems too? Then write

some about me! I should love it. And do be quick. I'm longing to see them.

YOUNG MAN. I'm afraid the best have already been written.

"No, she is athirst and drinking up her wonder:
Earth to her is young as the slip of the new moon."

LUCY. Was that written about me?

YOUNG MAN. Yes—no—yes! All the love poetry in the world was written about you!

LUCY. Oh! . . . I must go in and dress for dinner.

YOUNG MAN [*intensely*]. No, no! You mustn't go—you can't go! You'll take the sunlight with you.

LUCY. But I must. It's quite time I went. I have to dress carefully to-night; Lord Staunton is coming.

YOUNG MAN [*in a strained voice*]. Because of you?

LUCY [*looking down*]. Yes. [*Impulsively*] I hate him! And he bores me. He's so absolutely dry, and years older than I am.

YOUNG MAN. Well, then—why bother about him?

LUCY. You don't understand. It's three years since my sister Isabel was married, and I come next. There are three others who'll leave school soon, and of course they'll want me out of the way before they come home. I left school this year. I hated it. Did you?

YOUNG MAN. Yes, I did!

LUCY. I'm glad. But I hate the idea of getting married too. I don't want school, and I don't want to be married, and in our family there is very little gap between the two. There! I've said too much, as usual. They *would* be cross.

YOUNG MAN [*gently*]. You're so lonely—

LUCY. So you said before. It's strange *you* should notice it so particularly. No one else does. And you know so little about me.

YOUNG MAN. So little! Oh, Lucy!—I beg your pardon. I didn't mean to call you Lucy. It just slipped out.

LUCY. Because you wrote it in the book, I suppose. Never mind. Say Lucy when we're alone together. . . . Another secret!

YOUNG MAN. Thank you—Lucy.

LUCY. I like the way you say it. . . . I've always wanted a friend I could talk to. I'm so different from the others. I can't talk to them about the things that interest me. They don't really care about books and poetry and music, for instance. But the worst of it is I haven't anyone to talk to about—love.

YOUNG MAN. Try Mr Algernon Charles Swinburne! [*Laughing*] He is generally supposed to be rather an authority.

LUCY. But he's only a book, and I want a person. For instance, I said to Isabel the other day that it would be so nice if I loved Staunton; but she said she had managed quite well without loving Rupert. She said I wasn't to expect too much from marriage, and the less you expected the less you were disappointed when the time came.

YOUNG MAN. She sounds more of a philosopher than a lover!

LUCY. She said marriage had a better chance of success if it was built on something a little more lasting than mere love.

YOUNG MAN. What!

LUCY. She said love was just a crazy, inexplicable, exhausting phase, like a fit of insanity. Then when you returned to normal you could set about marriage with some one else in a practical, businesslike way, and perhaps make a success of it—as long as love never interfered again.

YOUNG MAN. What *are* you talking about?

LUCY. Love.

YOUNG MAN. That you're not.

LUCY. I'm not?

YOUNG MAN. You're simply quoting some ghastly ideas put into your head by a misguided, misanthropic woman called Isabel—confound her!

LUCY. Sh! She's considered very clever.

YOUNG MAN. Then the world's wisest people should be considered fools.

LUCY. So you don't agree with her!

YOUNG MAN. Agree with her? To hell with her! [*Lucy looks horrified.*] Don't you see it's intolerable, unthinkable, unforgiveable, that anyone like you should contemplate a loveless life? It's sheer blasphemy. You—you are made for love. You're needing it, waiting for it, starving for it! Can't you see?

LUCY [*amazed*]. But no one has ever talked to me like this before! I wish they had. I wish I understood what I ought to do.

YOUNG MAN. Do what your heart tells you, and let the whole world go to blazes if it tries to spoil the only thing that matters.

LUCY. The only thing that matters. . . . Oh, I wish Staunton would talk to me like that! But I know he won't. He's so formal.

YOUNG MAN. Forget him—forget him! You and I are both going to forget him, from now on, for ever. [*Seizing her hands*] Don't wreck your whole life. Don't die before you've lived—or loved, for it's the same thing. Love is life! It is, I tell you, it is! You *shall* believe me.

LUCY. Oh, hush, hush. I was wrong to talk to you so much, and let you say all this. But I was so lonely. You guessed it all.

YOUNG MAN. Promise me never to be false to love!

LUCY [*drawing her hands away*]. You don't know, you don't understand. I ought to be made of sterner stuff, but I'm not. I'm afraid of Father, and Mother, and Isabel—yes, I'm afraid of Staunton too! It's contemptible, isn't it? How you must despise me!

YOUNG MAN. I don't. I love you.

LUCY [*shrinking away*]. No! No! You can't.

YOUNG MAN [*seizing her hands again*]. But I do! Suppose I kissed you now? [*Draws her towards him.*]

LUCY. What would they say if they found out? They'd send you away. I couldn't bear it.

YOUNG MAN. They won't know. It will be another secret between us both. Aren't we both alone? What's in the future for either of us—apart?

LUCY. The future——

YOUNG MAN. To-day—this evening—this moment—is ours to keep. Who cares about the future—*now*!

[*He clasps her to him, kissing her passionately.*]

LUCY [*responding*]. Oh, John, John! I do love you! I tried not to, but I can't help it. I do love you so much! Help me—it's going to be hard for us both. What shall we do? What will become of us?

YOUNG MAN. But you love me?

LUCY. Of course I love you!

YOUNG MAN. Then love doesn't count the cost. Love doesn't reason or wait. It takes you by surprise in one great glorious moment, and blots out everything—all the past and all the future——

LUCY. The future!

[*Black out.*]

[*The man on the seat stirs uneasily and moans a little.*]

A light appears in the distance. It is the policeman again. The man gives a kind of long sigh, and slumps down into his corner.

[The woman enters from the opposite direction to that of the policeman. She drags along tiredly, and pauses as the policeman comes up to her.]

POLICEMAN *[flashing light]*. 'Ere you are again! Didn't I tell you to go 'ome?

WOMAN. I'm going. I've just been trying to put it off as long as possible. I hate that sordid little room! It's nearly unbearable on a summer night like this.

POLICEMAN. Yes. I can see you was used to better things. Your records showed that too. And you got decorated in the War, didn't you, for tending the wounded under fire?

WOMAN. Yes.

POLICEMAN. Even if it *was* enemy wounded I take my hat off to you. Any woman as sticks in a C.C.S. during bombardment deserves the best. I went through the War, and I know.

WOMAN. Thank you.

POLICEMAN. But what for and why did you marry a foreigner? *[No answer.]* 'Ere, I remember! You was Lord Staunton's widow before you did that, wasn't you?

WOMAN. Yes.

POLICEMAN. H'm. Interesting records, as I said. Daughter of a peer too?

WOMAN. I told you I was a British subject by birth. My name was Lucy Anstruther.

POLICEMAN. Of course. Now you see if one of these refugee committees can't do something for you. Don't like to think of any lady born a British subject being dragged through all the horrors you've had to face—war, revolution, destitution, poverty, disease, death. Now that husband of yours 'as gone people will be much more ready to help *you*. Nothing but an undesirable alien, he was.

WOMAN *[hurriedly]*. I'll get back now. Good night.

POLICEMAN. Good night, and don't you have no nightmares!

WOMAN. Impossible. I live with ghosts.

[She moves off. He turns his light on the man.]

POLICEMAN. Nah, then. Shift it.

[There is no response. He grips the man, who is limp to his touch.]

Coo, blimy! He's gone.

[He blows his whistle. The woman turns back.]

No, not you, lady. I'm calling for the next man on the beat to give me a hand. One of these 'opeless down-and-outs 'as gone and died on us. Why they can't die in institutions I don't know. You've had more than your share of horrors, I reckon. You go on home.

[She passes out of sight. He blows his whistle again, then grips the lifeless form by the shoulders. Another light is seen approaching.]

[Calling] Hurry up there, can't you! *[Exclaiming to himself]* Brr—he's hæmorrhaged all over the place. . . .

CURTAIN

Newgate's the Fashion

By Helen Foy

From "Glances Back: Five Short Plays."

Copyright 1938 by Helen Foy

CHARACTERS

SIR JAMES THORNHILL

JOHN SHEPPARD

ROUSE	}	<i>prison officers</i>
LANGLEY		
IRETON		
AUSTIN		

MR WAGSTAFF, *Ordinary at Newgate*

WILLIAM KNEEBONE

WILLIAM PAGE

JOHN GAY

LADY FANNY FANDELOUP

MISS ARABELLA VAUGHAN

LORD MOUNTDESTRIER

MR ALDERNEY

WILLIAM FIGG

THOMAS

KATE COOK

*Applications regarding amateur performances of this play should
be addressed to Messrs A. P. Watt and Son, Elastics House,
10 Norfolk Street, Strand, London, W.C.2*

Newgate's the Fashion

Old Newgate Prison, November 13, 1724. In an angle of the Condemn'd Hold, under the barred window giving on the archway, John Sheppard is sitting to Sir James Thornhill. The celebrated portrait will authorize the pose, the dress, the manacles, the wall, the window, the table and chair. As for the face and the hands—if any actor can reproduce those, “said Alice, ‘I’ll give him sixpence.’”

Sir James is working busily; but when he looks next at his subject the sad little face has lifted a little, though the enormous dark eyes are still staring at—one would like to know what.

THORNHILL. Your head lower a trifle, John.

JACK. I b-b-beg pardon, Sir James, sir, was I m-m-moving?¹

THORNHILL. Rather too high for the pose.

JACK [*with a queer little smile*]. Looking out of window.

THORNHILL [*abstractedly, working*]. Faith, not much to see——

JACK. No, sir; no, Sir James. J-j-just the outer air . . . just that.

[*Thornhill, arrested, looks at him; frowns, a little troubled; and resumes work abruptly.*

THORNHILL. Egad, you're better off here, boy—'tis a cold air.

JACK. Will it have changed by M-M-Monday, Sir James, d'ye think?

¹ “... has an Impediment or Hesitation in his Speech.”—*Bill offering reward for recapture.*

THORNHILL [*frowning again*]. Monday . . . ?

JACK. A pity if it should be c-c-cold on Monday and so many to see me take the air in my c-c-c-coach.

THORNHILL. Tut, never say die, John. Here are all your fashionable friends day by day—never fear but one or another must surely intercede with his Majesty——

JACK. Not they; they've paid their two guineas already to see me d-d-dance the tight-rope; and they'll not be bubbled.¹ And as for all this—why, blow me! 'tis the mode, d'ye see, to spend three and sixpence for to see "that rascal Sheppard."

THORNHILL. Maybe you're right——

JACK. If I'm not I'll shove the tumbler.² Why, take yourself, Sir James, with all respect. D'you come to the Whit³ for your m-m-models as a rule?

THORNHILL. Well, don't be severe, John; and sure you can see 'tis not idleness brings *me* or the wish to take the first-comer's picture?

JACK. Indeed, sir, I don't mistake you. I takes your att-t-tention for a great honour. Is the draught l-l-like my face yet, Sir James?

THORNHILL [*taking the canvas off the easel and bringing it to the chair*]. Here.

[*Jack scans it eagerly; his delight in being 'drawn' by a celebrated painter—knighted, too!—is rather sweet in its naïve vanity.*]

JACK. Don't it make me too old?

THORNHILL. How old *are* you, John?

JACK. Two-and-twenty, they reckon.

THORNHILL. Ecod, you don't look seventeen. [*Then to himself almost, staring*] Never saw a . . . no, run me through if ever I did——

¹ cheated, ² to be whipped at the cart's tail, ³ Newgate,

JACK. What, Sir James?

THORNHILL [*slowly*]. Nothing. . . . [*Shaking off his ideas*] Difficult likeness to catch, that's all.

JACK. I think it very like—but too old.

THORNHILL. Ye-es . . . yes, you're in the right; I'll attend to that. [*He returns to the easel, and, replacing the picture, takes up his brushes again.*] You'll approve this picture.

JACK [*looking down complacently at his lovely black suit*]. I likes to be p-p-painted in this fine coat. Oh, that's what I like.

THORNHILL. Ah, ye do? That last precious bit of shop-lifting, was it?

JACK. I admits the sneaking-budge¹ is not 'igh-c-c-class; but *you'll* allow, Sir James, as a genelman must d-d-dress to his station.

THORNHILL. O! emphatically.

JACK [*when he talks fast the stammer disappears*]. Crumbs, what a gaime! Them two pawnbroking Israelites tremblin' up two pair o' stairs, and me callin' out orders to my desperayte companions, as never was there at all, you'll understand——

THORNHILL [*watching the strange face and painting eagerly*]. Did you now?

JACK [*giggling*]. "Nix my dolly!" I shouts—"All's bow-man!² Barkers, pals, and flash the muzzle," I calls out bloody-like, "if they goes for to strike the gig"³—and not a popp within a mile of me 'and as I knowed on, and *that* 'ud have flashed in the pan most like.

THORNHILL. You never used violence, did you?

JACK [*with slight aversion*]. Nah. Don't like seein' folks 'urt. It's . . . it's my *art* as I loves. [*Thornhill nods, pleased.*]

¹ shoplifting.

² "No one about—all's safe."

³ unlock the door.

But you'd 'a' laughed too, Sir James, if you could 'a' seen me bonin' the pick o' the rum luries at my ease.

THORNHILL. The what?

[*Rouse has appeared in the doorway.*]

ROUSE [*coming in*]. The fine clothes, in the King's English, Sir James. Your servant, sir.

THORNHILL. Good day, Mr Rouse. Rum luries. Egad, I'll try that on the fellows at White's.

JACK. Will the coat show up well—will it l-l-look all shining and exp-p-pensive, Sir James, in the painting? Mr Rouse [*loftily*], no one w-w-w-wants to take a draught of you; Fame [*with a comic little histrionic air*] 'as passed you by; but [*condescending*] you may l-l-look at it.

ROUSE [*upright official and good fellow*]. Thank ye, Jack. Business first, pleasure after. I came in to look at your darbies.¹

JACK. Don't disturb me; I'm posin'. Sir James——

[*Appealing.*]

THORNHILL. That's all one, John; we mustn't let Mr Rouse in his duty.

ROUSE [*after a glance over the irons has turned his attention to pockets, seams, and linings*]. And what have we got to-day?

JACK. Blood! What c-c-could I have got, Mister Dubs-man?²

ROUSE. You won't deny I found a chisel in your breeches last week? Stap me! [*He has brought out a handful of loose gold and bank-notes from one of the big flap-pockets.*] You'll buy out the Mint, Jack.

JACK. O! they're free-h-h-handed enough with the cole.³ You lay your wages o' sin tho', I'd give it all for a 'ammer and a punch, Mr Rouse, or that same chisel as you took away so obleegin'. Thank ye [*as Rouse stuffs it all back in the*]

¹ irons.

² turnkey.

³ money.

pocket]. O! I wish ten g-g-guineas might g-g-go to the debtors' side—pray will you see to it? Mr Austin was telling me there's a woman j-j-just about to l-l-lie in——

[*Langley has come in.*]

LANGLEY. That Mrs Gale? Delivered this morning early —'twas dead tho'.

JACK. Dead? Well, there's a kinchen with sense. But, however, the mother'll be glad of the money—d-d-do me the kindness, Mr Langley.

LANGLEY. Willing. Here's the fresh chain and padlock, Mr Rouse.

JACK [*in disgust*]. Cripes! What'll you tie me up by now—my ears?

LANGLEY. Maybe you'll not find this quite so simple.

THORNHILL [*who, of course, has been nervously irritated by the interruption, breaks in with genuine feeling*]. Mr Langley—come, gentlemen, is not the poor lad in three hundred pound weight of iron already? Surely barbarous as unnecessary . . . I shall feel it my duty, Mr Rouse, to make representations——

ROUSE. With respect, Sir James, you mistake; we do no more than change one lock for another that may not be so easy opened——

[*Jack laughs.*]

LANGLEY. Right, Jack, try your hand at this.

JACK [*carelessly*]. I'll open it now, if you like.

THORNHILL. What?

ROUSE. Go ahead.

JACK. Well, I requires to 'ave found a rusty nail somewhere and [*quoting sardonically*] "secreted it about my person."

LANGLEY. And haven't you?

JACK. Mr Rouse just been all over me.

ROUSE. Where is it?

JACK. I 'ates these suspicious natures. 'As either of you a toothpick 'andy?

THORNHILL [*who has approached, interested*]. Toothpick? [*Laughing*] Permit me.

[*Producing an elegant shagreen case, which he opens and offers.*]

JACK. My eyes! Ridge! ¹ I'll trouble you, Sir James.

ROUSE [*grinning*]. Better not, Sir James.

JACK. Distressin' to the feelings o' genelmen, a'n't he? What company 'ave you moved in, Mr Rouse?

[*He stoops over the 'horse-lock,'² his fetters ring, the manacles hang on his hands and get in his way; the three men watch him, absorbed. They bend over him. Suddenly they gasp—there is a rattling clash.*]

Well? [*The padlock is unfastened and out of the staple.*]

THORNHILL. Good Gad!

JACK. Shall I l-l-lock it again, Mr Rouse?

ROUSE [*staring at him; slowly*]. If—you—please. . . .

[*They watch him, fascinated.*]

LANGLEY. My soul . . . !

[*The snap of the padlock is heard, and Jack hands back the toothpick with a quiet smile.*]

JACK. Vastly obleeged, Sir James.

THORNHILL. Unbelievable—unbelievable. . . .

ROUSE [*to Langley*]. Call Ireton. I'll have the bracelets linked short. [*Langley hurries out.*]

JACK [*sharply*]. No, Mr Rouse, no. Pray, Sir James, speak for me. [*Urgent, appealing*] I did but show you. You bade me try my hand, and I did. By God it a'n't at all 'andsome in you, Mr Rouse!

¹ gold.

² He was stapled to the floor by a huge padlock on his leg-irons.

[He begins to cry very miserably, poor little sad lonely thing.]

THORNHILL *[really upset, patting his shoulder]*. Now, John, now, keep up your spirit. Mr Rouse, I repeat I shall feel it my duty——

ROUSE *[patiently]*. My service, Sir James, I know my duty. Ah *[turning to a third gaoler who has hurried in with a set of tools]*, lock me these close, Ireton, if you please.

[Langley comes back, with a fourth warder.]

JACK *[while Ireton is at work on the handcuffs]*. It's a shame——oh, it's a shame, a dorg's trick! You arst me, you dared me do it, an' now——an' me thinkin' to please you! noble-'earted Britons you are—and 'ere's our Mister Austin too——four galliant 'eroes again' one pore little carpenter's boy in three 'undred pound weight of iron—you bloody-minded minions h'ov the law *[His humorous proclivities overcoming his misery, tears give place to levity, as usual.]*——my arse, won't you get a parrot-cage for to 'ang me from the ceiling while you're goin' abaht it? which you won't forgit the lump o' sugar I do 'ope.

[During this tirade, spoken very fast and received by the long-suffering officials with the utmost good nature, Mr Wagstaff, the Ordinary, has come in. He seems to have been a well-meaning eighteenth-century parson enough, and Jack bore him no ill-will for ferreting out files and discoursing of imminent hell-fire. It was the thing for parsons to do in Newgate.]

WAGSTAFF. What is this? What is this? Sheppard in trouble again? More altercation? More impatience? Fie! —— . Sir James, your very obedient.

THORNHILL *[who dislikes him]*. Yours, sir.

WAGSTAFF. You are painting our young friend?

THORNHILL. I'm doing my best, Mr Ordinary; but the pose is just now interrupted.

ROUSE [*worried*]. I beg your pardon, Sir James, I'm sure.

IRETON. There now, Jack—you know we don't want to be hard on you.

ROUSE. Your business to escape if you can, mine to see to it you don't.

JACK [*sullen*]. Let's both mind our own business, then. [*Sniffing; then with dignity*] Mr Ireton, I'll thank you to blow my n-n-nose. The inner pocket. Let's see 'ow *you* fake a cly.

THORNHILL [*to Langley, en parenthèse*]. Fake a cly? . . .

LANGLEY [*similar*]. Steal a handkerchief, Sir James.

WAGSTAFF. Shocking, this flash talk—and frequently so blasphemous——

THORNHILL [*short*]. Painful, sir, I'm sure, to one of your cloth.

IRETON [*flourishing a handkerchief of the finest lawn*]. Some of the pawnbroker's loot?

[*He assists Jack as requested; for indeed the poor boy's hands are locked fast together.*]

JACK. Vastly ind-d-debted. . . Good day, Mr Ordinary, sir. Lookin' at the portrait of the celebrated Sheppard? 'Ow's the coat goin' on? I likes to be painted in this c-c-coat.

WAGSTAFF. Your coat, Sheppard? So soon to appear before your Maker, and bound hand and foot to the vanities of this world?

JACK. You can see for yourself, doctor, whether I'm bound h-h-hand and foot or no.

WAGSTAFF. Tush! 'Tis not of earthly fetters, of chains and of links of iron, that I would speak.

JACK. Likely not; but I would that am wearin' 'em. Lift 'em once, doctor; you'll speak of 'em, I'll lay a——

WAGSTAFF. What is their weight to the weight of sin on a soul?

JACK [*dry*]. You much burdened that way, Mr Ordinary?

ROUSE. Come, Jack, reverence.

WAGSTAFF. Nay, Mr Rouse, we endure scoffs with all patience.

JACK. No offence, doctor. Mr Rouse, you don't mean to keep me like this? Pray set my hands on the slack chain.

ROUSE. Later, boy—not just now.

JACK [*roused, bitter*]. 'Tis barbarous in you—and here are four to watch me [*Rather broken, and with a dreary sigh which is almost a groan*]*—oh, I wish you in these irons, I does, and five days and nights chained fast on one 'ard chair!*

THORNHILL. Mr Rouse, 'tis severe; be compassionate. He speaks no more than truth; here are four of you all together——

ROUSE. Correct, Sir James; and before long with all this raree-show the Town is making of him there'll be forty, or four hundred, maybe, in and out of the Condemn'd Hold before lock-up.

AUSTIN. 'Tis none so easy for four men to watch all those folks and snabble¹ the pal in disguise that's just about to slip him a file——

LANGLEY. We have our credit to think of, Sir James; there's no inhumanity in intention——

WAGSTAFF. 'Tis hard when faithful servants of Government and the law should be decried. As for the close lock, if it gall him, let him open it with his boasted art—having compassed such marvels of late.

THORNHILL [*coldly, as he puts up his brushes*]. Not well said, Mr Ordinary.

[He sets his easel against the wall to be out of the way of the expected crowd. The portrait is visible now to the audience.]

¹ catch.

JACK [*mimicking, sanctimonious*]. Nay, Sir James, we endure scoffs with all patience. [*Turning wearily, he sees the picture, and his face lights again.*] That's goin' to be my c-c-coat to a miracle.

THORNHILL. Mr Moses' coat, surely?

JACK [*gaily*]. Possession's nine points of the law, I 'ave 'card say. . . . [*Dismayed*] Mr Kneebone! [*Under his breath*] Mr Kneebone . . .

[Ireton has ushered in a quiet-looking little 'cit' in a decent suit of drab.]

KNEEBONE [*coming straight to him; quiet and friendly*]. Well, John, how d'ye do? [*Thornhill moves up-stage to Rouse.*]

JACK. I do take this kind—I do. You are n-n-n-not so s-s-set against me, then?

KNEEBONE. Are you set against me?

JACK. Why, no, Mr Kneebone, sir. You 'ad to give the evidence.

[By-talk, mostly inaudible; every one not in the immediate picture must move about, grouping, exchanging remarks.]

KNEEBONE. Well — I'm glad you justify me, however. Do you want for anything?

JACK. No, I thank you.

THORNHILL. D'ye expect a crowd, you say?

LANGLEY [*joining them*]. He's the talk of London.

KNEEBONE. They keep you well?

JACK. O yes, I have good things to eat. They're a kindly lot. And the whole Town filling my pockets with

[Austin watches Jack and Kneebone, standing by Jack's chair.]

guineas. You see my picture?

[Ireton introduces newcomers; Langley follows them round unobtrusively.]

[Thornhill has come down.]

KNEEBONE *[deferential, to Thornhill]*. Your 'umble, sir—I have the honour, I see, of addressing Sir James Thornhill.

THORNHILL. The honour is mine, sir.

[They move up-stage to the picture.]

KNEEBONE *[surveying the canvas]*. Brilliant! Brilliant!

[Wagstaff joins them.]

THORNHILL. Most kind of you. But the subject inspires one, you know.

JACK *[calling across]*. 'Tis the coat I—— What, William! *[Ireton has admitted a rather weak-looking youth in a butcher's blue frock.]* You never tippin' the cole now? *That* won't do!

WILLIAM PAGE. That's naught—saved it out o' wages. Jeck! Oh, *dear* Jeck, 'ow are you, my dear old boy?

WAGSTAFF. Surely he was your servant at one time?

THORNHILL. Your apprentice; and robbed you, Mr Kneebone?

KNEEBONE. Alas, Sir James——

WAGSTAFF. A reprobate, I fear——

[*The others have come down, and overhear.*]

JACK. Very fair, considerin' 'ow ill I am.

KNEEBONE. Ill? Is he ill?

[*Concerned.*]

THORNHILL [*similar*]. Ill, John?

ROUSE [*puzzled*]. Ill?

JACK. I'm a dyin' m-m-man.

PAGE. Ow, Jack!

[*Snuffling.*]

WAGSTAFF. Tut, Sheppard—most untimely levity!

JACK [*grinning, winking at Page*]. There's your t-t-text for c-c-condemn'd sermon come Sunday, Mr Ordinary. Crack-lin' o' thorns an' the rest. Cheer up, William. And now who's this?

[*Ireton has admitted Gay.*]

THORNHILL [*seeing the newcomer*]. Why, Gay!

GAY. Thornhill, how are you? I heard you were painting our interesting felon. Aha! Do I see our interesting felon over there?

THORNHILL. John, this is Mr Gay.

JACK. Your servant, sir. Is this the genelman as writes, like Mr Defoe?

GAY. Friend o' yours, Mr Defoe, a'n't he?

JACK. Very kind he is. Wr-wr-writing my l-l-l-life. Auto—something.

THORNHILL. Is he, though? Now, Gay, you mustn't be behindhand. Turn out an opera.

JACK. What, one o' them singin' plays?

GAY. No hope of presenting anything like you. What a little thing you are, Sheppard. D'ye carry all that iron as a rule, or is it worn only at your levee?

ROUSE [*to Langley, sotto voce*]. Keep your eyes open.

JACK. It's the usual trimmings. You see, they have some c-c-curious notion I might break out of Newgate.

GAY [*playing up*]. Not possible?

JACK. Quite, I assure you. Not but what they're kind

with it all—save Mr Wagstaff. He's the fire-eater—kn-kn-knows all about 'ell.

THORNHILL [*half laughing*]. The Ordinary will only do his duty, John——

GAY. Meaning he makes himself damned disagreeable in the doing?

JACK [*wryly*]. I do 'ope not to the ext-t-tent you mention. Should be sorry to 'ave to abide 'im again where I'm bound.

PAGE [*bashful before the gentlemen*]. Ow, Jeck, don't be reckless to sy so. . . . [*Uncertainly, hoping his idol won't laugh*] Sinner wot repenteth, you know, and—your pardon, genelmen, for makin' so free afore my betters.

[*Rubbing one leg on the other.*]

GAY. A'n't you William Page?

PAGE. Your servant, sir.

GAY. Oho! the *fidus Achates* of the Finchley capture.

PAGE. Beg pardon, sir?

JACK. Just 'is gammon. *Fidus* what you like, 'e's a bow-man¹—a *rum* one if ever there was—rubb'd 'ere to the Whit² for my sake which 'e wouldn't turn snitch for the forty——

THORNHILL. Turn snitch for the—— Oh, to be sure, the reward.

PAGE. Wot, me? I spits on 'em as would! Nah, I leaves thet ter——

JACK [*with hard contempt*]. Oh, don't speak of 'er!

PAGE. Well, but, she can't play you no more dorg's tricks, Jeck.

JACK. Still in the jug?

PAGE [*nodding*]. Nabbling a tattle³ in Leicester Fields on the buttock-and-file.

[*Jack shrugs, with a spurt of contemptuous laughter.*]

THORNHILL. Do they mean Elizabeth Lyon?

¹ safe one.

² committed to Newgate.

³ watch.

GAY [*nods*]. Edgeworth Bess.

THORNHILL. But isn't that his wife?

GAY. As requisite, I believe. Jack——

JACK. Sir?

GAY. How many—ah—wives . . . ?

JACK. Hush, Mr Gay, sir—Mr Ordinary moves this way. . . . Cripes! look at this.

WAGSTAFF. Tut - tut . . . dear me! Ahem, ahem!

GAY [*glass to eye*]. By gad, if it's not——

THORNHILL. My life on't—Lady Fanny! . . .

JACK. Lord love me, *there's* a pair of snowy breastes under them stays!

GAY [*to Thornhill*]. Who's the gal with her? Pretty thing—d'ye know?

[*By-play.*
LADY FANNY [*outside*]. But can you *swear* he's not *sehvage*? My lord, will you vouch for't?

WAGSTAFF [*to Langley*]. Mr Langley, is it wise——

[*He comes down-stage.*
LADY FANNY. I shall swoon if . . . I vow I shall fall. . . .

LADY FANNY. You *assure* me now—you swear he'll be safe to go near. . . .

[*The 'fashionables'—four of them—are now on the stage, a footman in attendance.*

LADY FANNY. Because I really *dare* not face anything *sehvage*. . . . Why, Sir James!—I'll die, but 'tis Mr Gay!

Oh, but where shall we hide from him, Arabella? He'll be pamphleteering—a shameless paragraph in some stinking lampoon—fie! let's go.

[Profound salutations all round have punctuated this last speech. The four gentlemen revolve in homage round Lady Fanny Fandeloup and Miss Arabella Vaughan, and the talk and animation prevent any view of Jack and take her ladyship's mind—such as it is—for the moment off what she has come so eagerly to see.]

GAY. Nay, ma'am, for your ladyship the pen is ever dipped in rose-water.

LADY FANNY. Poison, you mean. And Sir James, Bella! My lord, Mr Alderney, you'll protect two poor women——

THORNHILL. Your ladyship mistakes—'tis we that are instantly disarmed.

LADY FANNY. I declare your brush can be as deadly——

GAY. Fie! The artist seeks after truth only——

THORNHILL. And what can Lady Fanny Fandeloup have to fear from truth——

GAY. —whether by brush or pen?

JACK *[entranced, to his side of the picture]*. 'Ark to 'em!

LORD MOUNTDESTRIER. Your ladyship must concede your fears entirely groundless——

MR ALDERNEY. And your person surrounded by devoted slaves——

GAY. Lady Fanny would command instant obedience in a Grand Cham of China——

LADY FANNY. In a *what* of china? *[The circle revolving, she catches sight of the portrait.]* Oh, but what is that? Painting here, Sir James—you? What—chains . . . who?

[The group moves again; she has a clear space

between her and Jack, who is gazing at her with a sort of rapture. Their eyes meet; hers open, wide and wider, till they match the openness of the mutual challenge. If anything, of course, Mr John Sheppard is too good for her. To Mr Wycherley himself, in an earlier age, Lady Fanny Fandeloup might have appeared not altogether unworthy attention.

Is *that* the creature? Arabella, look! But—but it's a boy! I expected—oh, but I expected I know not what of a shaggy thing . . . quite a Giant Fee-fo-fum——

GAY. And, ma'am, your la'ship finds little Jack the—ahem!—Giant-killer instead.

[Alderney and Mountdestrier smile. The Ordinary is looking horrified. Page has fled to the shelter of Ireton at the door and whispers to him. Kneebone has quietly effaced himself. Jack, fully recognizing in Lady Fanny the type and proclivities he adored in the 'Hundreds of Drury,' cannot take his eyes off her. The Ordinary coughs, snuffs loudly, rattles a chair. Rouse, Langley, and Austin have moved together in a group behind Jack.]

LADY FANNY [*brazenly delighted; this is a sensation!*]. But only look, Arabella [*the drawl is more and more exasperating*]—such a strip . . . ling.

ARABELLA VAUGHAN [*very uneasy*]. Sure, ma'am—cousin, 'tis not here Cox's Museum and the Waxworks——

[She bites her lip and looks at Jack with concern. He takes in her words, turns his head, and looks at her in surprise, his whole face changing. She looks down and moves away towards the portrait, Jack's eyes following her.]

LADY FANNY [*laughing unrestrainedly*]. Can he really be—— Mr Alderney, they've hoaxed us.

ALDERNEY. No, ma'am, no. I allow your surprise tho'. [*He advances, glass to eye.*] So you're the famous Sheppard?

JACK. Yes, sir; I am the Shepherd; and *these* [*nodding backward at the turnkeys*] are my flock; and I cannot stir abroad to take the air but they are all baaing at my heels.

LADY FANNY. O! delightful. My lord! a wit for your club. Positively, I must secure you, you know, for my Assembly next Thursday.

JACK. Thursday, ma'am?

MISS VAUGHAN [*outraged; in a whisper, twitching Lady Fanny by the dress*]. Cousin, recollect——

LADY FANNY [*blandly*]. What is the matter, Arabella? 'Tis for Thursday, a'n't it? [*To Jack*] I'll take no denial.

JACK. Your la'ship's to c-c-command. I'll c-c-cut a v-very particular appointment I have on Monday.

LADY FANNY. You will? how vastly obleeing. I trust not *too* great a sacrifice?

JACK. Why, no—I might . . . s-s-survive! But it will mean disappointin' a number of people c-c-come to meet me.

LADY FANNY. O rabbit 'em! What do they matter? Many of 'em?

JACK. Some hundred thousand.

LADY FANNY [*laughing over her shoulder at her party with a mock shudder*]. A *fête champêtre* at this time of year! [*To Jack, sweet and harmless*] An open-air festival on the green-sward, I take it?

JACK. Yes, ma'am—a dance under a Tree.

LADY FANNY. The Maypole?

JACK. The Tight-Rope.

LADY FANNY. I am sure my Assembly can offer no attraction so *charmant*. What do you say, Mr Alderney, and you,

my lord—shall we compromise the affair, and attend Mr Sheppard's Assembly instead? Arabella, you'll be of my party?

MISS VAUGHAN [*brusque*]. Much indebted, ma'am—quite out of my power to wait on your la'ship.

[*Pressing her handkerchief to her lips, she goes up-stage near Thornhill. Mountdestrier follows her and appears to speak soothingly. Langley is always moving unobtrusively round the groups, and his beat just now bringing him near the entrance—where Kneebone and Page hover uneasily—he hails a very large man whom Ireton has just let in.*]

LANGLEY. Why, blow me tight if it a'n't the great Figg!

FIGG. I 'opes I finds you well, Mr Turnkey.

ALDERNEY. Stap me—the Champion!

MOUNTDESTRIER [*coming down*]. Why, Figg!

GAY. Old Figg, egad!

FIGG [*ducking to Mountdestrier*]. Your obedient, my noble patron—and my ladies and gentlemen. . . . And my service to the 'ero of London.

JACK. Your title, Mr Figg.

FIGG [*moving up and clapping him on the shoulder*]. Not by no means, my bantam. I yields the palm.

MOUNTDESTRIER [*laughing*]. What, with never a round?

JACK. I'd a mind, your lordship, to send him a formal ch-ch-challenge——

ALDERNEY. You had!

JACK. To fight 'im at all w-w-weapons in the Strong-Room——

FIGG. Oh, Lord! I'm a man of peace, Jack. Call and drink a glass with me instead, when you next gives the Harman¹ the slip.

¹ constable.

JACK. I'll eng-g-gage to wait on you at the Oxford Arms in any case; 'tis all in my r-r-road, d'ye see?

LADY FANNY [*to Alderney*]. I vow he has an air with him, the ensnaring wretch! Pray, Mr Prize-Fighter, could *you* have broke out of the castle?

FIGG. Lord love you, ma'am, I'm too big to go a-chimney-sweeping.

LADY FANNY. The chimney—la! 'Twas those metal-studded doors—they are hawking prints of 'em all over the town. He must have a secret none can guess at.

JACK. N-n-no, your ladyship; the journals had a very true account in the m-m-main.

LADY FANNY [*laughing*]. *Your* account! I'd have you whipped till you confessed.

MOUNTDESTRIER [*bland*]. My *dear* creature! be merciful;—the town would riot.

ALDERNEY. Come, Sheppard, obleege her ladyship; 'tis a debt you owe for being the Hero of London!

GAY [*histrionic*]. The Proteus—the Supernatural Being—et cetera.

MOUNTDESTRIER. That *was* your hand, I think, sir?

GAY. No, 'twas Applebee's Journal, my lord, stole my lawful thunder.

ALDERNEY. *Did* the devil assist you in person?

JACK. Yes, sir; he fell down the chimney so soon as I'd m-m-made a wide enough breach in it.

LADY FANNY. What did you promise him—your soul?

JACK. When he has already more than he can d-d-do with, ma'am?

MOUNTDESTRIER. Seriously, Sheppard, is it true you accomplished it alone?

JACK [*quietly*]. Seriously, my lord, I do d-d-d-declare I had no help from any, save only from God Almighty.

WAGSTAFF [*this is his cue, in the presence of nobility or not*]. Shame, Sheppard! So near your account and speaking thus profanely! To take the name of God impudently in your mouth, and His Word lying neglected day by day—I say, lying here put to no use [*He pounds the Bible on the table.*]
— Oh!! [*Exclamations simultaneously.*]

ROUSE. What's that?

KNEEBONE. Dear me!

PAGE. 'Urt 'isself?

LADY FANNY. What's the matter?

MOUNTDESTRIER. Taken somewhere?

FIGG. Wot's up?

MISS VAUGHAN. His hand . . .

AUSTIN. Something wrong?

WAGSTAFF [*shaking his hand*]. My fingers—something sharp! [*He is ferreting at the Bible.*]

ROUSE. Something sharp?

[*All the turnkeys are round Jack, who is overcome with silent laughter. Langley snatches the Bible, wrenching at the back.*]

LANGLEY [*holding up a file*]. That's what stung you, Mr Ordinary.

GAY. The serpent of Genesis coiled among the leaves!

JACK. You can't say it's put to no use, doctor.

[*Ejaculations, simultaneously.*]

THORNHILL. A file?

ALDERNEY. Run me through the body—ingenious!

MOUNTDESTRIER. In his Bible, egad!

PAGE. Oh, pore Jeck!

KNEEBONE. A Bible too—dear, dear!

FIGG. Nosy old cull!

GAY. Monstrous ill luck!

LADY FANNY. A sacrilegious wretch!

ROUSE [*laconic, to Ireton*]. Lay it by with his collection.

WAGSTAFF [*mopping his fingers, which in truth have not suffered much*]. Who brought it you?

JACK [*wilful*]. You, doctor, and bade me m-m-make good use of it.

WAGSTAFF. Tush! Confess: who put you on this means of escape?

JACK [*passionately*]. How can you! Always asking me that——

LADY FANNY [*it would be TOO shocking to be baulked of the sport on Monday*]. 'Twas that butcher there, I'll lay a hundred! Sneaking villain . . .

FIGG [*grinning, as he lugs forward Page by the collar*]. Was it you, my lad?

PAGE [*savagely at Lady Fanny*]. Wish it 'ad been, an' no lie!

LADY FANNY [*to Rouse*]. Why a'n't he searched? Strip 'em both! You'll find your bird flown again, Mr Gaoler——

MOUNTDESTRIER [*dry, very fashionable*]. Never fear, madam. We are here five to protect your person, including Mr Figg [*with a bow to the bruiser*], who, truly, should count for two.

WAGSTAFF. To hide such a thing in the leaves of the Holy Scriptures——

JACK [*hitting back*]. One file's worth all the Bibles in the world.

LADY FANNY. O! the reprobate wretch—how amusing! Pray, Mr Ordinary, preach him a sermon; here's an attentive congregation, I'm sure.

WAGSTAFF [*with honest aversion, but a most unchristian irony*]. Your ladyship feels the need of a homily?

[*He crosses to the door, tying a handkerchief round his fingers.*]

LADY FANNY [*quite equal to the impertinences of 'a little upstart chaplain'*]. O rat me! Will you begin upon me? "Who shall find a virtuous woman?"

[*Laughing loudly as the indignant clergyman makes a pompous exit.*]

MISS VAUGHAN [*timidly laying a hand on her admirer's arm*]. My lord, we should take leave. My cousin will expose herself—

FIGG. Peery old cove—serve him right.

JACK. But, however, I'm sorry for his forks.

ALDERNEY. I suspect you exercise the chaplains, Sheppard.

JACK [*he keeps writhing and fretting his hands*]. All gingerbread fellows¹—they c-c-come for c-c-curiosity, or to form papers and sermons upon my behaviour.

GAY. Egad, he was bit over that file!

MOUNTDESTRIER [*laughing*]. Who *was* the friend at need, I wonder?

GAY. If 'twas anyone in company I suspect her ladyship.

LADY FANNY [*shrieking à la mode*]. You monster!

JACK. Fie, sir! The last you should suspect.

ALDERNEY. 'Tis a crime to impeach a brother of the calling, eh?

JACK. Were all the fraternity such Tight-Cocks² as mys-s-self, sir, the reputation of British Thievery might be carried to a g-g-greater height than ever before.

GAY. What would you have gone to work on with the file?

MISS VAUGHAN [*low to Mountdestrier*]. I can't hear him baited so!

JACK. How c-c-c-could I g-g-go to work on anything, like this?

[*He holds up his linked hands; the wrists are all bloodied.*]

¹ hypocrites, presumably.

² men who could keep silent.

KNEEBONE. Oh, dear, this is too bad——

FIGG. 'Ere, don't work against 'em, boy, you'll 'urt yourself sore.

AUSTIN. Give that over, Jack, you'll sever a vein.

GAY. I'm damned if I like it——

THORNHILL. Unnecessary barbarity——

MOUNTDESTRIER. I allow it seems over-anxious——

MISS VAUGHAN. His wrists, Mr Rouse—chafed and bleeding—pray!

MOUNTDESTRIER [*distressed at her tears*]. Come, Rouse, oblige us—let this humane young lady see him on the slack chain before taking her leave.

LADY FANNY. Oh, Lord! Is it wise? Such a desperate wretch——

JACK. You think, ma'am, I m-m-might fail your ladyship at the Assembly on Monday?

LADY FANNY [*a wicked smile*]. I vow 'twould be inconceivably shocking if you did!

JACK. I take your ladyship's concern for a great honour. And my careful friends here you will see [*waving his free hands towards the group of gaolers*] to be all of the same mind.

ALDERNEY. Stap my vitals!

AUSTIN. My blood!

[*The four turnkeys make a simultaneous rush for Jack's chair.*]

JACK. Easy, easy.

[*The company crowds round with ejaculations of astonishment.*]

GAY. Gad's life, how d'ye *do* it, Sheppard?

ALDERNEY. The fellow must have bones like jellies——

LADY FANNY [*furiously*]. There it is! You fool, Arabella!

THORNHILL. And the hand is *broad* in type, and very muscular——

JACK. Gentlemen, pray! Such kind attention overcomes me . . . and Mr Rouse will be wanting to fit a fresh pair——

LADY FANNY [*like a hyena*]. Pinion him at the elbows! Fast!

JACK. Not till Monday, ma'am.

LADY FANNY [*nearly screaming*]. You'll let him 'scape again! Mr Head Gaoler, you are to answer for him——

MISS VAUGHAN [*with blazing eyes, taking the horrible creature sternly by the arm*]. Will you go, cousin? We are to wait on my Lady Suffolk at five. My lord! Mr Alderney! You attend us, or do you stay? Thomas, the coach to the gates.

LADY FANNY [*checked; elegantly venomous*]. 'Od rat me, child, your tragedy airs! [*With intention*] Vastly interesting this sensibility, my lord, I hope you think?

THOMAS. My lady's coach stopping the way.

LADY FANNY. Mr Alderney—Mr Gay, shall I carry you anywhere? [*Gay bows deeply. With mock fashion, to Jack*] We shall meet on Monday, I do trust—can't conceive how I shall support the time till then. . . .

JACK. Your l-l-ladyship is all condescension. I never could hope to express the *emotion* your interest, ma'am, has aroused in me.

LADY FANNY. But perhaps I am able to apprehend it? [*Seeing Gay slip a guinea on the table.*] Ah, let me leave my purse in your keeping—we'll fancy you've rifled me of *all* my treasure on Bagshot Heath.

[*At this nearly everybody smiles broadly.*]

JACK. 'Tis my deep chagrin that I n-n-never attained so far.

LADY FANNY [*very pointed, and in her best drawl*]. No.

Well, what can't be cured must be . . . *endured*, you know. We must not dwell on what might have been.

[Her final laugh is quite decent—whimsical, frank, honest-eyed. Alderney and Gay offer their hands to lead her ceremonially to her coach. The footman is about to follow at six paces.]

JACK *[quick and low]*. Hi, Rainbow!

THOMAS *[similar, checking]*. Wot cheer, Jeck!

JACK. 'Ad a brother in your line.

THOMAS. Left it for Bot'ny Bay, didn't 'e?

JACK. Yuss. Not if 'e'd 'ad a good service like yours 'e wouldn' 'ave.

THOMAS. Ah! . . . *[Winking unutterable things.]*

JACK *[wagging his head in an ecstasy]*. Wot a shape! . . .

THOMAS *[closing his eyes in another]*. Cor! If you knew——

[Here he is suddenly aware of the continued presence in the Condemn'd Hold of Arabella and Mount-desrier—the others not counting—and this requires an immediate resumption of the professional rôle. Tasselled stick at the correct angle, Thomas paces gravely out. Jack follows his progress with dancing eyes in a face puckered with delight. He turns and winks at the turnkeys, nearly as amused as he. But his looks change as Arabella approaches. With her eyes on his lacerated wrist, she offers her handkerchief, which he takes, astonished and abashed.]

JACK. Never waste a tear on such a precious r-r-rogue, madam.

MISS VAUGHAN. I wish you a good evening, John Sheppard. Will you spend this?

JACK. O! ma'am, m-m-may not I keep the handkerchief ins-s-stead?

MISS VAUGHAN. Keep it by all means, and my poor half-guinea with it.

JACK. 'Tis all bloodied, too. I crave your pardon for c-c-costing you a tear, and for deceiving you into the bargain. . . . I wish [*very low and nervous*] I might kiss your hand, m-m-madam.

[He stands up heavily in his rattling leg-irons, and a naïve wonder at her as a chaste woman makes him look like a child almost, with those amazing eyes he has. But at her obvious shrinking from him he bites his lip in a spasm of pain. Mountdestrier comes down watchfully.]

MOUNTDESTRIER [*this can't be allowed*]. Miss Vaughan. —Good day, Sheppard.

JACK. Your lordship's very 'umble.

[But his eyes never leave the girl's face. She lifts hers suddenly, and holds out her hand for the salute.]

MISS VAUGHAN [*looking at the torn and defaced Bible on the table*]. 'Tis good for reading . . . as well as for hiding files.

JACK [*raising his too highly honoured lips from the slim white hand, looks where she is looking*]. True, madam; and I wish I had read more in it.

MISS VAUGHAN [*shyly*]. Will you read in it—to-night? [*Struck*]. Do they allow you no bed?

JACK. No, ma'am—nor a candle. 'Tis dismal in the dark.

MOUNTDESTRIER [*laying a purse on the table*]. D'ye get any sleep?

JACK [*smiling*]. No more but some confused dozes.

MISS VAUGHAN [*distressed*]. On a chair——

MOUNTDESTRIER [*compassionately*]. Your irons gall you a good deal?

JACK. I bear all with the temper of a philosopher.

[*Arabella turns and gives Mountdestrier her hand; half-way to the door she is overcome, and sobs.*]

MOUNTDESTRIER [*deeply moved*]. O madam! my adored Vaughan——

[*He supports her out of the Condemn'd Hold. Jack turns to Ireton.*]

JACK. There's a angel.

AUSTIN. Queer start, the like of that being t'other's own cousin.

JACK. I believe you.

LANGLEY. *She* took your fancy, tho', my lad.

JACK [*appreciatively*]. Blood! You'd not m-m-match her at Needham's. . . . Put 'em on, put 'em on. That was just a little game to am-m-muse the 'Nobility and Gentry.'

[*Sententiously.*]

IRETON. Give 'em their money's worth, eh? Damn my eyes if I know what'll hold you.

JACK [*weary*]. I won't do it no more. I'm that fagged.

AUSTIN [*kind*]. Want your dinner?

JACK. Little later, if it's all the same.

ROUSE. I must ask visitors to leave the prison; 'tis time.

THORNHILL [*covering his easel*]. Shall you be ready for me to-morrow, John?

JACK. W-w-wait your pleasure, Sir James.

THORNHILL. Good night, then. Good evening, gentlemen.

JACK. Good night, Sir James, my service to you.

[*Thornhill goes.*]

ROUSE. Your obedient, Sir James—no, Ireton, no more admissions.

KATE COOK [*on the threshold*]. O pray, Mr Gaoler—Mr Gaoler, let me see him.

JACK. Kate! Why, Katey, where'd *you* raise three and six-pence?

KATE COOK. I a'n't, Jack—but Mr Turnkey there was very kind, an' Mr Figg, 'e spoke for me.

JACK. 'E's a trump.

FIGG. Let 'er in, guv'nor—come now——

ROUSE [*good-humoured*]. *You've* got to go.

FIGG [*in a posture of defence*]. Put me out, Mr Turnkey.

JACK [*quite alarmed*]. Gord's mercy, don't you touch 'im, Mr Rouse, d-don't you lay a finger on 'im——

ROUSE [*laughing*]. Three minutes, and I lock the doors, in or out.

KATE COOK. O Jacky, 'ere's yer clean 'ankerchers, dear, an' a shirt—yes, please, Mr Gaoler, there a'n't nothing there, wish I may die there a'n't—you may shake 'em out. O *please*, let 'im 'ave them. . . . [*Sobbing*].

LANGLEY. There, there, there . . .

JACK. This is my real wife, I suppose, in a manner o' speakin'.

KNEEBONE [*taking leave*]. I rejoice to see a sober young woman affected towards you, John.

JACK. Mistress o' my affections now a long while. Good night to you, Mr Kneebone, and thank you very k-k-kindly for takin' my 'and. [*Kneebone lays a hand on his shoulder; Jack murmurs, cast down and ashamed*] I be'aved with wicked ingratitude t-t-towards you, sir—breakin' my 'prentice time and all . . . thank you. [*Kneebone goes*]. Good-bye, William.

PAGE [*blubbling*]. Ow, *Jeck!*

JACK [*stuffing notes in his apron pockets*]. 'Ere, William, old pal——

PAGE. Nao, Jeck, I'll not! Nao!

JACK. To pleasure me, William.

PAGE. Jeck! Dear Jeck—— Oh dear!

IRETON [*slapping him on the shoulder*]. Don't give up like that, my lad. See if 'e don't give us all the slip yet.

[*He pilots him out.*]

JACK. That's a rum cull, if ever. St-t-tood by me all through.

ROUSE. Now, Mrs Cook, if you please——

KATE COOK. Yes, sir; oh, yes, Mr Gaoler, please. Good night, Jacky, my dear. I mended the shirt strong—it'll wear for a long while.

JACK. Last me till Monday, at any rate.

KATE COOK [*crying bitterly*]. Oh, oh, don't, Jacky!

JACK. There now, g-g-give me a kiss. Here's twenty guineas, d-d-don't you prodigate 'em. [*To Figg*] Pray, look arter 'er—I knows you for a bowman——

FIGG. I'll see to it she don't want.

JACK. And 'ere, will you do me the k-k-kindness? Take twenty to my mother, in Hughes Lane. And say to 'er . . . n-n-not . . . ter come. [*Emphasized, but unemotional.*]

FIGG [*bluff*]. I'll do that, Jack.

JACK. Thanks. [*Then, in his best vein*] And my 'and on it, I'll 'alt my travelling chariot at the Oxford Arms at 'alf after eleven on M-M-Monday, Mr Figg, and take a pint with you—for all I 'as a very particular engagement a m-m-m-mile or so further along the road.

[*The kindly Figg has led away Kate Cook, with Ireton close in attendance. Langley and Austin follow, carrying away the lanterns. Rouse leaves last; there is a clash and rattle of lock, bolt, and chain. The small still figure on the chair is dimly discernible in the November twilight filtering in at the little barred window to which the strange white face is raised.*]

The High-backed Chair

By Norman Holland

CHARACTERS

KATHLEEN QUINN

MOLLY QUINN

SHAWN O'REILLY

NORAH FARRELL

*Applications regarding amateur performances of this play should
be addressed to the International One-Act Play Theatre, 9
Wardour Street, London, W.1*

The High-backed Chair

The first thing you notice in the farm kitchen is the wide fireplace at the back with the black pot hanging in it. The doors you take for granted, since one, the sturdier, is well down in the right-hand wall and the other, which connects with the rest of the house, is as far back in the left-hand wall. There is little furniture in the room, except a deal table and one or two wooden chairs or stools. Oh, of course, there's the tall chair by the table with the high back and the long graceful legs. It's a fine chair, surely, and it has the air of a great lady who has come on a visit of charity to the place, for the rest of the things are no great shakes. To be sure, there's the photograph of the good-looking young man, the fox-brush, and the shotgun above the mantelpiece, and there's the riding-whip hanging on the rear wall, but the few pictures are a bad lot, faded, peeling, and one hangs definitely askew.

It looks the kind of room somebody came back to rather than lived in—the kind of place where a man took off his boots before he went to bed, or took a drink standing up to hearten himself to face the black morning.

Kathleen Quinn, an unforgiving, good woman of forty-five, is sewing curtains at the table with her daughter Molly, a girl of twenty. Molly is sitting in the high-backed chair.

MOLLY [*looking up from her sewing*]. It'll be hard for us, Mother, here in this place, and us so used to the town and its ways.

KATHLEEN. It'll be harder for you, Molly, my girl, for I was reared in a place like this one—a lonely place and quiet.

But it'll be better when I've had time to look around me, for I'll get a man to cut the turf, tend the cattle, and do the rough work about the farm. I must be careful awhile, though, for we're two lonely women in a wild place.

MOLLY. It's a wild place, but I suppose it must have suited my Uncle Patrick. [*She rises and crosses to the fireplace, where she stands looking at the photograph.*] It's a wild face he had, my Uncle Patrick.

KATHLEEN. Come back to your sewing. This house will look more like a home when we have these curtains to the windows, and I'll have them up to-morrow or my name's not Kathleen Quinn. Ah! Your Uncle Patrick was the wildest sort of man, and it's no ill respect I mean to the dead when I say there aren't many harder drinkers above ground than him that's dead and gone. God quiet his restless soul!

MOLLY [*returning to her sewing*]. Still, he was kind to leave this farm to us in his will, Mother.

KATHLEEN. And why shouldn't he leave me his bit of a farm? Am I not his only sister left alive? Was I not the poor widowed sister he would send the money to? I tell you when we lived at home and he was a little one I was the only one who troubled about him. I near wore my hands to the bone trying to knock sense into his head.

MOLLY. It was strange, Mother, that he should leave the high-backed chair to the old woman. Is it well that I should sit in it?

KATHLEEN. Is it well that you should sit in it? The farm and all were left to us while your uncle was in his right mind. He gave away the other things—the riding-whip and the chair—when he was dying, and he died not quite in his right mind.

MOLLY. What do you mean, Mother? Uncle fell from his horse.

KATHLEEN. So he did, so he did. [*She is rather disturbed, and, rising, crosses to the fireplace.*] It's as well you should hear the way your Uncle Patrick died—the people here may twist the truth. He rode all day with the Castleblaney Meet and somehow lost himself, but your Uncle Patrick could lose the world and still find himself near a drink. He spent the night with some tinkers and trollops in a hut in the hills drinking poteen till dawn, and then, nearly helpless, he set out for home. Near Bangillian he tried to jump a stone wall, and his horse fell and rolled on him. He lay there a long while until an old woman o' the roads, Norah Farrell, came by. She stayed with him until this man Shawn O'Reilly, a horse-breaker, came, and O'Reilly went for the cart that brought him home to die. He made over the whip and the chair to them through the lawyer, but it's clear his mind was gone.

MOLLY. But, Mother, he'd have died on the road if it hadn't been for them. It was so brave of the old woman to stay by a man so badly hurt. Some people would have been afraid. I think I would have been.

KATHLEEN [*resuming her seat and picking up her sewing*]. Don't be foolish, girl. The whip's nothing, except that it belonged to Paddy. But the chair . . . the chair's the only thing that's good in this rackery house. No old woman o' the roads is going to have it. What good would it be to her, and she with no house to put it in?

MOLLY. Still, Uncle did leave the chair to her. He must have wanted her to have it.

KATHLEEN. Ah, your uncle was the foolish man. He'd give anything at all to the first tinker he met on the road. He was more kin to that kind of people than to you and me.

MOLLY. All the more reason why the old woman should have the chair.

KATHLEEN. There is no reason why the chair should leave

the house where it has stayed so long. I'll give her a shilling, or maybe two, for the money'll be more than the chair to her.

MOLLY. She looked so fine at the funeral, I thought, the old woman. So quiet and lonely, she seemed, standing apart from the rest. He looked fine too, in a different way, the young man, Shawn.

KATHLEEN. What! Shawn O'Reilly? The man's a poor horse-breaker that has worn the same jacket these ten years, I'm told. He'll not stay long in this house, for I'd give him the whip another way than he wants it if I had my way. I'll not have any more Dermot McArthurs, my girl.

MOLLY. You're not to believe you scared me away from Dermot, Mother. I'd have gone away with him if he'd have taken me. I asked him to take me with him, but he was afraid. It was over then between Dermot and me.

KATHLEEN. Be silent, girl. I'll take the whip to you in another minute. You're done with me if I find you with another scamp the like of Dermot. Bring in some sticks for the fire.

*[Molly gets up and goes to the door, which she opens.
She pauses in the doorway looking out.]*

What is it? Answer me, can't you?

MOLLY *[not moving]*. It's the old woman. It's Norah Farrell. She's coming up the road. She's over the hill walking very slowly towards the house.

KATHLEEN *[rising]*. Come in and shut the door.

[Molly closes the door and returns to the table.]

MOLLY. Oh, Mother! I fear for us if you keep the chair from her. Bridge O'Keefe was telling me Old Norah had the strange power. There was a man refused her bread, and his hens didn't lay, his pig died, and he took to waking, coughing, and sweating in the night. What will you do?

KATHLEEN. I warrant Norah began that tale herself.

Strange power! The strange thing is that anybody should fear a weak old woman the like of her. I think maybe I'll put the chair where she won't see it. Perhaps she'll take one of these.

MOLLY. No, Mother, no! She knows the chair. She could have the law on you. Better do what you said—buy the chair from her.

KATHLEEN. Ah, she's only an old ignorant peasant body whose wits the winds have blown away. I'll take it and put it——

[There is a knocking at the door. Kathleen is silenced, and neither of the women move. Insistently, politely, the knocking is repeated, and then the latch is lifted, the door opens, and the old woman walks over the threshold. She is very old and most weather-beaten, yet she has a serene dignity which has its roots in acceptance and humility, and age has granted a crown of silver to her shawled head.]

NORAH. Good day to you, ladies both. It's a grand day and all.

MOLLY [*dubiously*]. Good day to you.

KATHLEEN. Leave this to me, Molly. Go and bring the sticks. [*With a glance at the old woman Molly goes.*]

NORAH. I'm Norah Farrell, lady of the house, her they call Norah o' the roads. I'm the one that was left the fine chair by the poor man that was buried from this house. Would it please you to let me take it now?

KATHLEEN. You shall not take it. I've taken advice in the matter, and the chair stays where it is. I'm very grateful for what you did for my poor brother, and [*taking up a purse from the table*] if a shilling, or maybe two, would help you on your way——

NORAH. Keep your silver, lady of the house. I would not sell my memories of Paddy, your brother, for many pieces of silver. It's the fine man he was, your brother, and I've sat—ah, many a time—in that chair across the table from himself while he shared his bit with me and I'd tell him stories. He was a great one for the stories. I'd tell him of the high kings and the little people and the places I'd been in since I last saw him. I'd tell him——

KATHLEEN. No more, old woman, no more. My brother was not in his right mind when he signed away this chair. He was drunk when he fell from his horse, and he lay in delirium for two days, I'm told.

NORAH. Were you here to see that? No, but I was. Shawn and me stayed with him to the end, and then Shawn had the doctor send for you.

KATHLEEN. What would you do with the chair if I gave it to you? An old woman of the roads has nowhere to keep a chair. You couldn't carry it round with you.

NORAH. There's Sarah Cullen has a cabin down the road. She'd let me keep it there, and times when I was this way I'd sit in it and fancy I was telling the tale of Conchubor to Paddy Burke again.

KATHLEEN. But that's foolish. You could come here and sit in the chair where you always sat.

NORAH. Begging your pardon, lady of the house, I couldn't come here again, for Paddy's dead that I came to see, and there's no welcome for me here. You're cold; Paddy was warm. You're that far apart. Why, I'd feel happy here those times with Paddy, and I'd feel I had a home again. That's all done, and all that's left of those days is that chair.

KATHLEEN. You make it very hard for me, Norah Farrell. You throw my welcome back in my teeth. Beggars are pride-

ful, it seems, in this part of the country. As for taking my brother's fine chair into a dirty cabin, I'll have none of it. Good day to you, Norah Farrell.

NORAH. You'll not let me take my fine chair then? My fine chair that Paddy wrote down for me in his will with almost the last breath of his body?

KATHLEEN. My brother's chair stays where it is.

NORAH. It stays where it is. It's Paddy you're wronging more than me, for he dearly wanted me to have it. They don't leave the places where they died, you know—not right away. They can't stand the loneliness of being dead. They can't change all at once, and Paddy's here, bewildered because he can't have his way.

KATHLEEN. Such talk may be kept for the peasants. For my brother's sake you may call here again. But that is my last word. The chair stays here. There's bread and a bit for you whenever you're this way.

NORAH. Bread and bit for me! There's that for Norah Farrell in any house or cabin in these parts. It was Paddy that I came to see. The chair was precious to me as the bright smile of him. Ah! A great love I had for Paddy. You'll know how it is, for I saw the way you looked at your daughter. Maybe I'll take her from you that keeps the last of Paddy from me. . . . Oh, not with bog sprites and dark things done when the moon is full, but . . . you'll see. Old I am and near the end of all, but it's the strange power I have over my enemies, the strange power.

KATHLEEN. The strange power, is it? We'll see what is left of your strange power when I've told the priest about you. Be on your way, Norah Farrell, and trouble me no more with your wild ways and ungrateful talk.

NORAH. I'll gladly go, lady of the house. Sarah Cullen may be old and her cabin broken down, but her heart has not got

withered to a stone inside her body. But think on this: I may come back this way.

[She starts to go. Molly comes in through the door with the sticks. She pauses on the threshold, and the old woman also stands still. The young woman and the old one exchange a long glance.]

You're not like her. You're more like Paddy that's gone. I'll pray for you a fine sweetheart. Good day to you.

MOLLY *[as the old woman passes]*. Good day to you.

[The door closes and the old woman is gone. Molly puts down her pieces of wood by the fireplace and hurries to her mother, who has resumed her sewing.]

Mother, what did you say to her? You should have given her the chair. No good can come of thwarting Uncle Paddy's will.

KATHLEEN *[without looking at her]*. That's what she said. Sit down and get on with your sewing.

MOLLY. But, Mother, I came in to tell you. Shawn O'Reilly's down the road talking to a priest. He'll be coming here for the riding-whip. Say you'll let him have it!

KATHLEEN. Well, now, a whip's a thing I have no great use for. He can take it. But a chair now, a chair . . .

[Shawn O'Reilly's knock and entrance are so sudden as to admit of no refusal. He is a lanky, youngish man with a humorous face. He is wearing shabby riding-breeches and a coat which may be ten years old but looks older.]

SHAWN *[bowing over his doffed hat and speaking quickly]*. Good morning to you, ladies. It's not long I'll be troubling you. My name's Shawn O'Reilly, and I was by way of being a friend of your brother, Mrs Quinn. He left me a small memento in his will. It's a riding-whip—perhaps the lawyer told you.

KATHLEEN. So you're the bog-trotting horse-breaker that's come to rob a poor woman of the whip that was her brother's. Take shame on you!

SHAWN. Now, Mrs Quinn, do I look like a robber? It's only because I had a great love for your brother that I want the whip at all. It was himself asked me to have it before he died and said he'd write it down in his will. For, saving your presence, he said, "My old skinflint of a sister will be for keeping the whip, though devil a bit of use it is to her."

KATHLEEN. You're very free with your stories about what my poor brother said when he wasn't right in his head. It's known that they often turn against their dearest when the head is hurt. Maybe I'll be keeping the whip to spite you.

SHAWN. Ah, you wouldn't do that. For it's no good to you at all, and here's me with a great need of a whip since Ballygannon races.

MOLLY. Why since Ballygannon races?

SHAWN. It was there my own was stolen from me.

KATHLEEN. What were you doing to have it stolen from you—a big, fine man like yourself?

SHAWN. Ah, I couldn't stop the man that stole it.

KATHLEEN. Why not?

SHAWN. Ah, I was drunk at the time.

KATHLEEN. More shame you for admitting it.

SHAWN. Yes, the same man stole your brother's boots, and us sleeping, innocent as babes, in a bit of a ditch we found.

KATHLEEN. You talk too much. Was that all your business?

SHAWN. I think it was. Ah, I had something to tell you. Father Moir's gone round the back to take a look at your hens. Maybe he wants to buy some. He'd always an eye for Paddy's poultry.

KATHLEEN [*taking off her apron and smoothing herself down*].

Father Moir, is it? Why couldn't you say so before? The poor man will think it's heathens he's among with only chickens to do him the honours of the place. Stay here till I come back, and maybe you'll be taking the whip with you. Molly, you keep on with those curtains.

[She goes out, and Shawn straddles his legs before the fireplace.]

SHAWN. I'll be here a bit, I'm afraid, Miss—er . . . I'm afraid I didn't catch your name when your ma introduced us.

MOLLY *[sewing]*. My name's Molly Quinn, my mother did not introduce us, and what makes you think you'll be here a bit?

SHAWN. My powers of observation and my knowledge of human nature. Your mother thinks she can drive a bargain, but she's never met Father Moir. He'll have her agreeing to half her original price and thinking she's been done a favour before he's finished with her. Ah, put your sewing down; you're pretending at it!

MOLLY *[putting her sewing on the table]*. Do you think it right that he should beat down my mother?

SHAWN. Ah, I never interfere with religion. I stick to horses. They're more reasonable.

MOLLY. Mister O'Reilly, I would like to ask you a question, if it's not presuming upon a short acquaintance.

SHAWN. Ask me anything in the world. My answer shall be as true as the light I see in your eyes.

MOLLY. We'll see then. It's a bit of gossip I heard about you to-day, Mister O'Reilly.

SHAWN. Now, glory be to God, if this isn't the worst place in the world for gossip. A man can't kiss a girl or take a glass without these old women making it sound like the Song of Solomon itself. Who was it was telling you? It'd be that Widow Foyle else Bridge O'Keefe, wouldn't it now?

MOLLY. It wasn't about girls or drinking, and it wasn't Bridge or the widow that told me. It was my own mother. She said you'd worn that same coat for ten years.

SHAWN. Ten years? Now isn't this place full of all the liars this side of hell? Ten years! I'll have the blood of them that told your mother. Tell your mother it's nearer twelve years I've had this fine coat, and I'll wear it as long again in memory of Colonel O'Hanahran that gave it me.

MOLLY. You knew my uncle, didn't you?

SHAWN. I knew him. Rest his soul.

MOLLY. What was he like? I never saw him, you know.

SHAWN. Ah, he was a queer sort of man, but one the devil couldn't have helped but like. He rode hard and he rode straight; he drank and sang, played cards, farmed in a fashion, worked hard now and then. He was a man of these parts, was Paddy. He was lucky at the racing, dealt cleverly but not craftily in horses, and he had a few disliked him, but all the countryside wept to hear of his death.

MOLLY. Were you with him often?

SHAWN. Yes, at races and horse fairs—oh, and in the shebeens! I was with him at Ballygannon—— But what does a young girl want to know about that?

MOLLY. But I want to know all about it. I've a great admiration for my Uncle Patrick. I want to hear about him—everything. All the good things and the bad things and the silly things he did.

SHAWN [*after a long look at her*]. You would. You would want to know that. You've a look of Paddy yourself.

MOLLY. Tell me about Ballygannon.

SHAWN. I will. Here, let's sit comfortable together.

MOLLY. But where?

SHAWN. It's too soon to ask you to sit on my knee! [*He crosses to the table.*] Let's sit here on the table.

MOLLY [*sitting by him*]. What if Mother——

SHAWN. Ah, your mother'll be ages yet. You don't know the eloquence of Father Moir, that's evident.

MOLLY [*straightening the curtains*]. Mind the curtains!

SHAWN. Ah, the hell with them! Were you ever at Ballygannon?

MOLLY. No, I never was.

SHAWN. Ah, it's a dear place. Just near the Great Bog of Cathean. Mind you, it's only farmers race there, but ye see some sport. Your Uncle Paddy won two races—one on his own horse, Dark Deceit, and one on a horse I was trying to sell called Sword of Boru. Well, we just had to celebrate, especially when an American nobleman bought Sword of Boru for two hundred guineas. I've some of the money still in the bank, I think. So we—we celebrated.

MOLLY. How do you mean—celebrated?

SHAWN. Well, we had a drink or two first, and then we kissed all the women. At least, all those we wanted to kiss!

MOLLY. You didn't!

SHAWN. We did!

MOLLY. I suppose you have to take a drink before you start kissing. The taste on the breath is not so pleasant for the women.

SHAWN. What would you know about that?

MOLLY. I suppose you're the fine roaring fellow when you've had a drink, but you're too frightened to go kissing when you're sober.

SHAWN. I'll not have that. I won't. [*He gets down from the table quickly and kisses her convincingly.*] There now!

MOLLY. You *are* like my Uncle Patrick then.

SHAWN. Very like in those things, and so are you, it seems. Do you like the same things he liked?

MOLLY. What things?

SHAWN. Oh, things like the morning waking very early, the sheen on a horse's coat, the song inside the fiddles at the fair.

MOLLY. Those were the things you shared with Uncle Paddy.

SHAWN. They were.

MOLLY. His niece likes those things too.

SHAWN. I thought she did. Listen, now—— Ah! It's too much to ask so soon.

MOLLY. Ask away, man. You're for ever half saying things.

SHAWN. I was thinking that there's a fair in Ballygannon to-night—the biggest of the year. There'll be fiddles singing what the voice could never sing, and there'll be dancing enough to dance away the sorrows of the world. Could I go with Paddy's niece?

MOLLY. If you'll tell me where to meet you, Shawn O'Reilly.

SHAWN. I'll be at the road fork by the next farm with Peter Maggin's car from seven until you come. Will your mother let you come?

MOLLY. Could she stop Paddy's niece?

SHAWN. I think not. Ah, it'd be a grand idea.

MOLLY. What—the fair?

SHAWN. No, something I just thought.

MOLLY. What is it?

SHAWN. I was thinking as you're fond of horses, and as I've been fond of you ever since I came in here, and as perhaps you're fond of me because of what I was to your Uncle Paddy, you might come with me to more fairs than Ballygannon. You might come round to this fair and that fair for always. What do you say?

MOLLY. I might.

SHAWN. When shall I know?

MOLLY. It depends on to-night.

SHAWN. Then you'll come with me. It's no thing for a fine girl to do, sit here and sew curtains when she might be seeing the sweet places of Ireland.

[He kisses her, and she struggles free of him.]

MOLLY. I must get on with the curtains for now anyway. Mother will be back on us.

SHAWN. So she will. You'll be there to-night?

MOLLY. You know I'll be there. Be sure about it, man. I'm quite certain.

SHAWN. If I stay here much longer I'll swear I'm bewitched. It might be your Uncle Paddy talking.

MOLLY. You'll not stay here much longer. Here's Mother.
[Shawn assumes an innocent and distant attitude.]

SHAWN *[as Mrs Quinn enters]*. Yes, Father Moir's been priest in these parts for thirty years.

KATHLEEN. Thirty, is it? He may be a man of God, but he drives a harder bargain than the devil. It's an oily tongue he has. You've all got oily tongues in these parts. *[She takes the riding-whip from its nail by the fireplace.]* Here, horse-breaker, or whatever you are, take the whip and go.

SHAWN. I thank you for this remembrance of your brother, Mrs Quinn. If there's anything I could ever do for Paddy's sister perhaps you'll let me know.

KATHLEEN. There's one thing you could do. I'll tell you what it is before you go. You can keep me from the sight of the drunken friends of his—the friends that brought him to his early grave.

SHAWN. That's not true, and most unkind. I hope you never regret those words, Mrs Quinn. Good day to you. Good day to you, Miss Quinn.

[He goes, closing the door behind him.]

MOLLY. Mother! You shouldn't be so distrustful and

insulting. We'll not have a friend for miles around this lonely place if you go on turning everybody against us.

KATHLEEN. Ah, he's a rogue we can do without. We'll see no more of him now he's got the whip. Though, mind you, I think he's a more passable rogue than that Dermot McArthur.

MOLLY. Why must you keep throwing Dermot in my face? Do you want to remind me of him for ever? I've done with Dermot, and he with me.

KATHLEEN. Ah, I've no call to want to remember that devil's whelp, and if you say——

MOLLY. You'll never hear of Dermot from me again, Mother. As for Shawn O'Reilly, we know no bad about him, and I think we should treat him as a friend of Uncle Paddy's deserves.

KATHLEEN. Be quiet, girl, and be sewing the curtains. I've seen more of men than you have, and I tell you he's a rogue. [*She takes a basket from the mantelpiece.*] There's above one of them hens laying astray. I'll be collecting the eggs if that rascal priest dares show his face here again.

[*She goes out, and for a moment Molly sews the curtains. There is a timid knock at the door which causes her to look up. She says "Come in, please," but the door does not open. She puts down her sewing, and, going swiftly to the door, opens it. Looking out, she gives a little cry and goes outside, returning almost immediately supporting the old woman Norah.*

NORAH. I had a pain. A bad pain inside. It took me sudden. I thought, maybe, you'd let me come inside and rest.

MOLLY. Come along and sit down. [*She helps her into the high-backed chair.*] Where's the pain?

NORAH [*her hand to her side*]. It's here. Inside. It comes

with the catch of my breath. I'm very old, you see. I get it sometimes.

MOLLY. It's maybe the wind. Mother often has it. I'll make you a drink.

NORAH. I wouldn't trouble you.

MOLLY. Sure, it's no trouble at all.

NORAH. Stay! You're changed since I saw you. You've the bright look on your face. Did he come, the sweetheart that I prayed for?

MOLLY. And if he did?

NORAH. Ah, you'd be telling an old woman that hasn't long to live, wouldn't you?

MOLLY. He came. He asked me to run away with him.

NORAH. And you'll go, you'll go, won't you? I wouldn't be an old woman of the roads if I had gone when the fine man whispered in my ear.

MOLLY. Yes, I'll go. I have to go. Stay still and I'll be getting you the drink.

[Molly goes out through the door on the left, and a sharp pain causes the old woman to wince. Her head goes back and her whole body is held by pain for a moment, and then the spasm passes and she relaxes again.]

NORAH. Sure, it's a bad thing to be old and to have no money, but it's worse to be young and poor, for then there's so much to be had for a little spending.

Ah, Paddy, and must you smile at me? Why are you smiling? It's a story you want, is it? Sure, I'll tell you a story.

There was a great king in the old days of Erin, a king not much less than Brian Boru, and his name was Conchubor, and he was the High King of Ulster. His throne was of the cold green marble that came out of Connemara, and the pipers went before him in the battle. The emeralds in his crown were

like caves the sea has drowned, and the Helmet of Conchubor was a great oath among the warriors. At his court there was an old soothsayer . . . an old soothsayer . . . Ah!!
[*For the pain has her again. She relaxes once more, however.*]
Give over smiling at me, Paddy. Give over smiling, you rascal. Let me be finishing my tale. . . .

[*She does not finish it, though, for the pain has done with her. She lolls slackly in the chair. Molly comes in bearing a cup.*]

MOLLY. Here, drink this; it'll ease you maybe. Ah, she's asleep, poor soul.

[*She puts the cup on the table and takes hold of the old woman by the shoulder. She sees that she is not asleep.*]

Sweet mother, she's dead. [*She steps back, crossing herself.*]
Dead in her high-backed chair.

[*After a look of irresolution at the old woman, something significant seems to strike her, and with an air of decision she crosses to the door. Opening it, she calls:*]

Mother! Mother! The old woman has come back for her chair.

CURTAIN

First Corinthians

By H. F. Rubinstein

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CHARACTERS

FEMALE

JUDITH, *wife of Stephanas*
SOPHIA, *her sister*
CHLOE, *a widow*
MELISSA, *her daughter*
EULALIA, *a feminist*
LOIS, *a married lady*

MALE

PHILIP, *Judith's son*
SOSILAS, *Chloe's brother*
GLAUCON } *litigants*
ARTEMAS }
MANES, *a slave*
TITUS, *Paul's emissary*

A FEW (NON-SPEAKING) SLAVES OF BOTH SEXES

SCENE: *In the house of Stephanas, Corinth.*

TIME: A.D. 57.

COSTUME NOTE

ALL the female characters, except Eulalia, keep their heads covered, Ionian fashion, throughout the play. Those entering from the street arrive with their faces veiled also, removing their veils immediately on crossing the threshold.

Applications regarding amateur performances of this play should be addressed to Messrs H. F. W. Deane and Sons, The Year Book Press, Ltd., 31 Museum Street, London, W.C.1, from whom separate copies may be obtained, price 1s.

PREFATORY NOTE

To read the Bible, *à la mode*, 'as literature' is at any rate to read the Bible; to study it as an 'inspired' record of religious experiences is an exercise which many people are finding more appropriate to the times in which we live. Readers of this play who are familiar with the First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians from either standpoint will notice that two of my characters have been 'lifted' straight out of that document—Chloe (i, 11) and the absent Stephanas (i, 16; xvi, 15-18). The rôle of Titus, as bearer of the letter, has been inferred from passages outside the Epistle itself. Most of the other characters, imagined by me as to form and name, will be recognized, however vaguely, by 'religious' (as distinct from literary) students as the individuals, brothers and sisters in the spirit, whose personal difficulties are evoked with so many vivid touches in the practical directions forming the bones of the letter. Thus—to give chapter and verse—the party politicians of the church ("I am for Paul"; "I for Apollos"; "I for Peter") live between the lines of chapters i and iv; the dilemma of Philip and Melissa is conjured up in vii, 25-39 (adopting Moffatt's "spiritual bride" for the "virgin" of the Authorized Version and "virgin daughter" of the Revised Version); Glaucon and Artemas are corrected in vi, 1-11; Eulalia is the unfortunate 'Aunt Sally' of xi, 3-16; Lois is restored to her husband in vii, 13. Sosilas may stand for the type of immoralist whose expulsion from the church is commanded in chapter v. The only character for whom there is no specific Scriptural warrant is the non-'Christian' Sophia. May I be pardoned for believing—as I do—that she is none the less true historically?

Of the great spiritual message summed up in chapter xiii of the Epistle, it would not become me to say more than that I am profoundly conscious of my presumption in attempting to communicate it in another medium.

First Corinthians

The scene is a room furnished with a number of chairs converging about a door, in the centre of the back wall, which leads into a farther room. A clear passage is left to a second door, to the fore of the left wall, and opening from the street.

The stage is untenanted at the rise of the curtain. Presently there is a timid knocking at the street-door. Judith, a middle-aged woman, enters from the inner chamber, and crossing to the other door, opens it, then starts back.

JUDITH. It's Sophie! [*Eagerly*] Won't you come in?

[*A somewhat older woman enters, uncertain of her reception.*]

SOPHIA. Judy! [*They embrace.*] I didn't know whether you'd want to see me.

JUDITH. What, my own sister! After all these years! . . . Sit down, dear.

SOPHIA [*obeying*]. Yes, we're still sisters, aren't we? And we don't get any younger. That's why I suddenly felt I'd like to call on you . . . while Judah's away on business.

JUDITH. You're well, I hope?

SOPHIA. Thank God. And you? [*She looks at her.*] We've both changed, I suppose.

JUDITH. I hope I have.

SOPHIA. And Stephanas—he's keeping well?

JUDITH. Fairly well. He's away too—at Ephesus.

SOPHIA. Also on business?

JUDITH [*with some reticence*]. On church business.

SOPHIA. He's as keen as ever then?

JUDITH. We both are. Does that surprise you?

SOPHIA. I only wondered. I suppose [*looking about her*] this is one of your meeting-places?

JUDITH. We have meetings here sometimes. . . . Your husband is as bitter as ever?

SOPHIA. Judah's very orthodox.

JUDITH. Yes. It's enough for him that Stephanas is a Greek. The fact that we are both Christians makes no difference—makes matters worse, even!

SOPHIA. Very much worse, I'm afraid. . . . I oughtn't to have said that perhaps.

JUDITH. Speak freely, please.

SOPHIA. Well, I hate to hurt your feelings, dear, but perhaps I ought to tell you. . . . Some rather unpleasant stories have been circulating lately— [*Judith winces.*] I'm not saying they're true, but they're giving your society a bad name, I'm afraid.

JUDITH [*with a sigh*]. And I'm not saying they're *not* true. . . . If you knew all the difficulties we had to contend against, Sophie. . . . Just think what it means—planning a way of life open to all the world—something completely new. . . . We've no traditions behind us, remember.

SOPHIA. Precisely. Because, don't you see, Judy, you've broken away from your traditions—traditions that served our ancestors for generations—

JUDITH [*gently*]. Don't let us go over all that again, Sophie.

SOPHIA. No. What's the use? [*Dabbing her eyes*] Oh, how I wish we could have remained friends. Do you remember how you used to confide in me—tell me everything about yourself? How I've missed you!

JUDITH [*moved*]. I've missed *you*, Sophie. . . . It had to be.

SOPHIA. I sometimes think . . . I think, for your sake, Judy, I might have become a Christian—if it hadn't been for Judah. He's such a good man.

JUDITH. And Stephanas is a good man. [*They are silent for a moment.*] No, I haven't forgotten how I used to confide in you—and what a blessed comfort it was at times. . . . I'm going to confide in you again if you'll let me.

[*Her voice is trembling.*]

SOPHIA. My dear, my dear.

JUDITH. Oh, Sophie, I'm in despair! Perhaps you won't understand. You see, Stephanas lives for this little church of ours—and I live for Stephanas. And after all our pains to watch it, day by day, just crumbling to pieces. . . . What we've been through! You wouldn't know Stephanas. His hair has turned completely white.

SOPHIA. He's gone to Ephesus, you say?

JUDITH. As a last resort! Our founder, Paul, is working there. Stephanas has gone to consult him. If Paul can't help us no one can. And I should have had word from Stephanas yesterday. . . . Heaven only knows what may have happened to him! Where Paul is there's always some disturbance. Not long ago he was in prison. Perhaps Stephanas never reached Paul. There was that awful storm the night he sailed. Perhaps—— [*She buries her head against Sophia's shoulder.*]

SOPHIA. Perhaps, on the other hand, Stephanas *has* reached Paul, and perhaps Paul *is* going to help, and perhaps you'll have good news of both of them in the morning.

JUDITH. Thanks. [*She dries her eyes.*] There, I feel better already! . . . I lay awake all last night imagining things. You couldn't have chosen a better day for your visit.

SOPHIA. Would you like me to stay the night?

JUDITH. Oh, my dear—you'd be such a godsend! . . . If you won't mind meeting and . . . associating with——

[*She pauses.*]

SOPHIA. With my sister's friends? I'll try not to mind!

JUDITH. And sitting down to table with them? [*Sophia is visibly disconcerted.*] I should quite understand, dear. . . .

SOPHIA. It's Judah I was thinking of. . . . Now I'm thinking of you—— And I'll risk it!

[*Judith presses her hand in gratitude. There is a low treble knock at the street-door.*]

JUDITH [*rising*]. That will be one of them.

[*Enter Chloe, a prematurely aged woman, in agitation.*]

CHLOE. Judith!

JUDITH. What is it, Chloe?

CHLOE [*drawing back*]. I thought you'd be alone. . . .

JUDITH. You've heard me speak of my sister Sophia? I've just been pouring out our troubles to her.

CHLOE. Then she won't mind if I——? [*As Sophia rises*] No, please don't go. . . . [*To Judith*] Only I wanted to see you before the others come. I promised Melissa.

JUDITH [*to Sophia*]. Chloe and her daughter Melissa are two of our most devoted workers.

CHLOE. Have you heard anything from Stephanas?

JUDITH. Not yet. [*Anxiously*] Is it something new, Chloe?

CHLOE [*with emotion*]. Melissa has been telling me . . . about her uncle——

JUDITH. Brother Sosilas?

CHLOE [*scornfully*]. Brother indeed! I ought to have warned you against him. I've always really hated him. . . . I know I shouldn't say that, but it's better than lying. One can't love really bad people—I mean people who are bad through and through.

JUDITH. Chloe, Chloe! Can that be said of anyone?

Surely there must be some good in your brother, or he'd never have wanted to join us?

CHLOE. Wait till you hear! . . . I'd better tell you from the beginning. Sosilas is my only living kinsman. When my husband died, leaving me penniless, with Melissa a babe in arms, this good brother of mine closed his door to us. He'd have let us starve. With God's help we came through—somehow. It wasn't easy. . . . Then, years afterwards, when Melissa was just fourteen, Sosilas saw us out together—down by the docks, where I was working—and followed us home. He said he'd been trying to find me to ask forgiveness for his cruelty in the past, and that he wanted to make up for it. So he offered to take Melissa into employment at good wages. Do you know what his business is?

JUDITH. Doesn't he manage an inn?

CHLOE. That's what he calls it. Fortunately I discovered in time what sort of an inn it was. He had quite a number of girls working there, earning big money for him—that sort of an inn. Melissa was as good-looking then as she is now——

JUDITH. And such a sweet, gentle soul, Sophie.

CHLOE [*continuing*]. It was just after I'd met Priscilla, and been taken to hear Paul preach. So I told Sosilas we didn't need his help. But that didn't put him off. He wanted Melissa, and he knew we were in straits, so he started pestering us with presents—clothes which we badly needed, and food delicacies—and he'd come and talk for hours about Melissa's brilliant prospects—the glib-tongued villain!—and sometimes we'd be sorely tempted. But in the end—God be praised—Paul won the battle for us both. . . . After that we thought he'd leave us in peace. He did for a time. Then one day he came to see me again, very humble in his manner, professing that he was worried by a dream he'd had, and begging

me to tell him all about our fellowship. And foolishly I took him at his word. It was just before Apollos came to minister here.

JUDITH. I remember your coming to consult me about it.

CHLOE. Do you remember how at the first prayer meeting he attended he . . . spoke with tongues?

[*She shudders at the recollection. Sophia is puzzled.*]

JUDITH. You won't know what that means, Sophie. Some of the brethren experience strange outpourings of the spirit in a state of trance.

SOPHIA. Oh, yes. I've heard it can be quite frightening.

JUDITH. Unfortunately the state can be simulated, and it isn't always easy to distinguish between the false and the genuine. [*To Chloe*] We all believed Sosilas to be truly inspired.

CHLOE. Yes, and admitted him into our circle on the strength of it. And now—already he's begun to show himself in his true colours! Would you believe it, sister? He has been at his old tricks with Melissa again!

JUDITH. Oh, Chloe! It isn't possible?

CHLOE. I found the girl in tears this morning after he'd left her. I'd noticed he'd been rather attentive to her lately. . . . Oh, he's a devil! Fancy preaching his foul doctrine under the cloak of our blessed Master! He tells her, sister, that as reborn Christians we are now free to sin—nay, that the more we sin the more grace we may obtain from repentance!

JUDITH. Horrible! [*To Sophia*] Now do you see the kind of enemy we have to reckon with?

SOPHIA. It bears out some of the stories I have heard.

CHLOE. Melissa insisted that I must tell you without delay. She feels that as we introduced him we are in a way responsible——

JUDITH. The poor lamb! We must set her mind at rest on that score at least. But now—how are we to act, Chloe? Even Stephanas could never quite decide what was the right thing to do. Without Paul's guidance we are all lost!

CHLOE. Melissa so dreads having to meet her uncle again. She wanted to stay away this evening. I told her she'd be safer in this house than anywhere else, even if he did dare to show himself——

JUDITH. Of course she'll be safe here. You persuaded her to come, I hope? We all love her so.

[A young man, pale and thoughtful, has entered from the inner chamber.]

SOPHIA *[rising]*. This must be your son. Philip, isn't it? *[He nods.]* You don't remember your Aunt Sophia?

PHILIP. I remember Mother took me to see you once—and she has often spoken of you since. *[He kisses her.]*

SOPHIA. What a handsome young man he's grown, Judy! He'll be wanting to get married soon, I expect! *[Philip abruptly averts his face. Judith and Chloe look equally embarrassed.]* Forgive me, please, if I've offended . . .

JUDITH. You couldn't know . . .

[In the ensuing pause there is a treble knock at the street-door, and Melissa enters timidly. She is a beautiful girl, in evident distress.]

PHILIP *[turning eagerly]*. Melissa!

[It is apparent that he is in love with her.]

MELISSA. Oh, Philip!

[She stands in the doorway, shy before Sophia.]

JUDITH *[going to her]*. Come in, dear. Your mother was here before you. . . . *[She kisses her and whispers]* Be brave,—trust in God. . . . *[Leading her forward]* I want you to meet my sister—and my oldest friend.

[Melissa inclines her head.]

PHILIP [*anxiously*]. Melissa!

[*Melissa looks yearningly to him.*]

JUDITH. I ought to be seeing to supper. Would you like to help me in the kitchen, Sophie? [*Sophia rises.*]

CHLOE. May I give a hand?

[*The three women pass into the inner chamber without further ado.*]

PHILIP. Melissa! No holy kiss to-day?

MELISSA. I couldn't before a stranger.

PHILIP. But now? [*They kiss under restraint.*]

MELISSA. Oh, Philip!

PHILIP. What is it, dear? [*He sits beside her.*]

MELISSA. You didn't hear then? Don't ask me to speak of it now.

PHILIP. Can't I be of help?

MELISSA. Your presence helps.

PHILIP. My love, you mean. You know that's with you always.

MELISSA. Yes, Philip. But I prefer it with your presence. Is that wicked of me?

PHILIP [*troubled*]. I don't know. Yes I do. Nothing you say or think could ever be wicked.

MELISSA. Oh, Philip, you mustn't—you don't know me. . . .

PHILIP. Even your tears are beautiful—as if God were shedding love through them.

MELISSA. Oh, I am wicked—full of wickedness. . . . Only don't love me less, Philip—I try so hard to be worthy.

PHILIP. A love like ours can never grow less. It's like the sun.

MELISSA. It keeps me alive, I know that. Oh, but it tortures. God help me!

PHILIP. Melissa! I'm in torture too. We must be strong,

both of us—keep our love high and pure and resist the devil that is for ever seeking to drag it down.

MELISSA. Sometimes I think it's easier when you're with me. Do you remember that day you asked me to be your spiritual bride?

PHILIP. Yes, Melissa.

MELISSA. You took my hand.

PHILIP. Yes.

MELISSA. You've never done that since.

PHILIP. Oh, Melissa. [*He takes her hand.*] God forgive me this once!

MELISSA. Philip, if we weren't believers would you—would you marry me?

PHILIP. What a question! Melissa, you aren't weakening in your faith?

MELISSA. Of course not, Philip. I only wondered. . . . [*A pause.*] Philip, I want to tell you something.

PHILIP. Is it what you wouldn't tell me just now?

MELISSA. No, not that.

PHILIP. What is it?

MELISSA. The night before your father left for Ephesus my mother went to see him.

PHILIP. I know. She gave him a special question to take to Paul. Concerning life after death, was it not?

MELISSA. So she said. I believe it was really about me.

PHILIP. About you? Whatever do you mean?

MELISSA. I don't know what she said, but I know what was in her mind. She's so funny sometimes. She's been worried about my health. As if Paul could help that!

PHILIP [*all concern*]. Your health? Melissa! You are suffering?

MELISSA. Not now, not now. Keep my hand, Philip. Oh, if we could only stay like this for ever!

[A treble knocking—rather louder than the previous ones—is heard, and Glaucon, a prosperous business-man, enters from the street. He carries a large basket, and is slightly inebriated. Philip and Melissa have broken apart.]

GLAUCON. Not interrupting, am I? Greetings to you both! *[They murmur, "Greetings, Brother Glaucon," in return.]* I'm a bit early for the feast, I know. Never mind. You're all going to have a taste of something special with me to-night *[displaying a bottle from his hamper]*—all my particular friends, that is. . . . Celebrations! As a matter of fact, I've been celebrating already.

PHILIP. What occasion, Brother Glaucon?

GLAUCON. What, haven't you heard? I won my action?

PHILIP *[sadly]*. The case against Brother Artemas, you mean?

GLAUCON *[nodding]*. It'll teach our worthy friend not to try and wriggle out of his bargains another time! *[He sits down heavily.]* The whole thing was over in less than an hour—a walk-over! My lawyer knocked the stuffing out of him with his first question. It's what I've always said: a clever lawyer's half the battle. The old judge gave it him hot and strong: "I never heard a feebler defence in the whole course of my experience! Judgment for the plaintiff for the full amount of his claim, with costs." *[Chuckling, he fails to hear a mechanical treble knocking at the door.]* "And seven days to pay it in, or the defendant goes to gaol!"

[Artemas, a less hardened man of the world, has entered in time to catch the last words. He too is carrying a basket.]

ARTEMAS. Sorry to disappoint you, brother, but at least you won't have that satisfaction. The money's already on its way to your lawyer.

GLAUCON [*taken aback*]. I didn't see you come in, Brother Artemas. . . . As a matter of fact, I didn't think you'd be coming this evening.

ARTEMAS. Quite so, brother. That's why I came. Fortunately I still have enough money left to fulfil my social obligations. [*He displays his overflowing basket.*] And I've learned my lesson—don't worry. I'll be careful in future never to have any business dealings with a fellow-Christian.

GLAUCON [*uncomfortably*]. Business is business, old man.

ARTEMAS. And a dirty trick is a dirty trick, sir.

[*Philip and Melissa have been listening with growing dismay.*]

PHILIP. Is there nothing I can say or do? Artemas—Glaucou, in the name of our common brotherhood——

GLAUCON [*with a shrug*]. That's all right. The thing's over and done with as far as I'm concerned. I was never one to harbour a grudge. [*Approaching Artemas*] Kiss and be friends again, eh, Brother Artemas? [*As the latter turns away*] Just as you please. All one to me.

PHILIP. This is terrible! As though the air were poisoned.

MELISSA. Oughtn't you to tell your mother?

PHILIP. I suppose so. Poor Mother—on top of all her other troubles . . .

MELISSA. I'll come with you.

[*They withdraw together into the farther room. Artemas casually seats himself, and after an interval Glaucou follows his example, selecting a chair at an extreme distance. A pause. Glaucou commences to fidget; Artemas proceeds to hum. Glaucou's control gives out.*]

GLAUCON. Call yourself a Christian!

[*Artemas continues to hum. A treble knock at the street-door heralds the entry of Eulalia, a mas-*

sive woman, elaborately attired and veiled. On the threshold she announces solemnly:

EULALIA. A benediction on all the saints of God here assembled!

[She deposits a basket on the nearest chair, and proceeds to remove not only her veil, but her head-gear, releasing plentiful ringlets of hair—the more conspicuous since the other female characters in the play keep their heads covered throughout.]

GLAUCON }
ARTEMAS } *[murmuring in unison].* Greetings, Sister Eulalia.

EULALIA *[disconcerted]*. Is there no one else?

[A treble knock, introducing Lois, an earnest and more simply garbed woman.]

LOIS. Greetings, all.

[Murmurs of "Greetings, Sister Lois," equally without warmth. Lois removes her veil and stares with disapproval at Eulalia, who, snatching up her basket, crosses the room to seat herself in isolation from the rest of the company. On Lois taking the nearest chair the four present are seen to be as widely separated as conditions permit. Another strained silence.]

GLAUCON. Papa Stephanas is still abroad on this mysterious mission, I suppose. There's something a bit fishy about it, if you ask me.

ARTEMAS *[snappily]*. Nobody asked you.

[Judith returns at that moment, followed by Chloe and Melissa, with Sophia and Philip in train. All rise to greet their hostess.]

JUDITH. Welcome, beloved friends. *[Greetings are returned.]* Be seated, please.

[*Glaucion, Artemas, Eulalia, and Lois resume their former seats.*

CHLOE. Come with me, Melissa.

[*She takes her to sit, right. Sophia, feeling rather out of place, has gone to sit apart on the opposite side of the room.*

JUDITH. Philip, will you look after your aunt?

[*Dutifully he goes to seat himself by Sophia.*

EULALIA [*who has been eyeing Sophia*]. We have a new-comer, I see.

JUDITH. A blood sister of mine, very dear to me. [*Addressing the company*] I want to say a few words—to make a special appeal to you all—for her sake, if not for mine——

EULALIA. Pardon me, beloved. Your sister is naturally shocked to see a woman's hair uncovered in a mixed assembly. She considers it unwomanly, no doubt. Perhaps I may be allowed to explain myself? [*Some sighing is noticeable. She addresses Sophia.*] I claim for Christian women the full liberty of body and soul enjoyed by our male brethren. Are we not children of one Father—and, as children, equals? You may tell me that the covering or uncovering of one's head seems to you a trivial matter. I answer that a vital principle is at stake. In refusing to be bound by a degrading social convention I am moved by the same spirit that inspires me to prophetic utterances in our prayer meetings. It is a spirit that will not be deterred by ridicule or abuse—even by the misunderstanding of my fellows. [*Looking round her*] One day they will understand—all the world will understand!

LOIS. It is not a question of our understanding or . not understanding, sister. It is for us to do as we are advised by our betters. It was laid down quite clearly by Apollos——

EULALIA [*scornfully*]. Apollos! And who is Apollos to dictate to me on a matter of conscience? I recognize only one authority in this church—the Apostle Paul.

JUDITH [*who has been vainly signing to them in turn*]. Sisters, sisters!

LOIS [*unheeding*]. Apollos was established as a preacher before Paul ever came to Corinth.

EULALIA. Not of the true faith, sister. Remember he had not been properly baptized.

LOIS. Baptism by John was sufficient to make him the most marvellous preacher I was ever privileged to hear—and a great prophet as well. It was a bad day for all of us when he was persuaded to leave Corinth. And the sooner he returns to us the sooner we may expect to see some order restored to this church!

JUDITH [*again interposing*]. Sister Lois, I beg of you——

EULALIA [*quietly effective*]. And was it by the advice of Apollos, may I ask, that you deserted your lawful husband?

JUDITH. Now *please*, Eulalia——

LOIS [*calmly*]. My husband is not a Christian. That was quite sufficient reason for leaving him.

CHLOE. Forgive me, Sister Lois. It was not my intention to reopen that question, but as the subject has been raised I cannot keep silent. I saw your husband only yesterday. It wrung my heart—the poor man looked utterly broken. And he was always so considerate and so devoted to you——

LOIS [*tight-lipped*]. I gave him every chance. He had only to accept our faith. I'm quite sure Apollos would have approved my decision.

EULALIA. Apollos, indeed! A mere pigmy beside Paul!

[*Sosilas, a handsome and bejewelled Greek, has sauntered in, after a perfunctory knocking, in time*

to take in the last speech. Melissa and Chloe at sight of him draw together in apprehension.

SOSILAS. Bravo, Sister Eulalia! My sentiments entirely! Let us be honest for once and admit that, for all his eloquence and learning, the late lamented Apollos was one of the plaguiest bores that ever came out of Egypt—which is saying much! Paul, present or absent, is the only ruler for me of this church—Paul with his magnificent vitality, his freshness of outlook, his broad-mindedness. Paul, before all things, is a man of the world. As I was explaining to my niece Melissa only this morning—— [*Seeing her*] Ah, my dear, so you are here before me! [*He seats himself beside her.*] I hope you have been reflecting on my words? [*She shrinks from him in disgust. Chloe, supporting her, half rises in protest.*] But the full implications of our faith are perhaps not so easy for the female mind to grasp. . . .

MELISSA [*choking*]. I can't stay here.

[*She rises abruptly and rushes into the back room.*

PHILIP [*who has been watching with growing concern*]. What is it, Melissa?

[*He hurries after her. Judith and Chloe exchange anxious glances.*

JUDITH [*bracing herself to deal with the situation*]. God give me strength!

[*Again the treble knock at the door, and a party of ill-clad, undernourished slaves of both sexes troops in. They are ill at ease.*

MANES [*their spokesman*]. Respectful greetings, on behalf of us all.

JUDITH [*advancing*]. Welcome, friends. Make yourselves at home.

MANES. Thank you kindly, ma'am. We'll be all right here.

[*They shuffle into seats near the door, keeping close*

together. Glaucon and Lois shift their places to keep apart from them. Sosilas also rises with the same object.

SOSILAS [*continuing suavely as he moves away*]. As I was remarking, friends, our gospel has an inner significance which is quite beyond the comprehension of a mere pedant like Apollos. Indeed, one would hardly expect to find a just appreciation of its subtle beauty in any mind untutored in the schools of Athens. The marvel to me is that Paul, despite the handicap of his antecedents, should have been, as it were, divinely chosen to proclaim the good news. I regard our Paul as an altogether exceptional product of this cosmopolitan civilization.

MANES. Begging your pardon, sir, if I might venture to speak——

SOSILAS [*with patronizing condescension*]. Assuredly, my good man.

MANES. Well, did you ever chance to hear the Apostle Peter, sir?

SOSILAS. I can't say I did.

MANES. Ah, but some of us slave folk have heard him, and, what's more, we ain't never likely to forget it. Just a plain, ordinary working-man he was, sir, a fisherman born and bred—none of your educated scholars like Paul and Apollos—but he'd known the Master—personally, as you might say—and worked with him right up to the end. . . . And when he spoke to you it kind of lifted you out of yourself. Some of us would give a lot just to hear that voice again! [*Murmurs of approval from his comrades.*] So if it's a question of taking sides, and we're allowed any opinion in the matter, Peter's our man! That's all I wanted to say, sir.

CHLOE. Why must we take sides, brethren? Why can't we just accept the Master's teaching?

SOSILAS. All very well, sister, but we must have some one to refer to on points of doubt.

A SLAVE [*in a piping voice*]. That's right, sir. We must have a referee.

EULALIA. Some one with a strong personality—like Paul.

LOIS. I don't consider Paul has at all a strong personality. Now Apollos—

[*General murmuring breaks out.*]

JUDITH [*mustering all her forces*]. Beloved, will you let me say one word? [*There is silence; seats are resumed.*] I had hoped that my dear husband Stephanas would be with us this evening. He has not yet returned from Ephesus. In his absence won't you all help me, please? Show your good will—show forbearance—sink all your differences and resentments—remember only our common devotion to the Master and Lord. . . . I can say no more. [*An embarrassed pause.*]

GLAUCON. I'm getting hungry, I know that. So what about supper?

[*A subdued chorus of "Hear, hear."*]

ARTEMAS. I have a point to raise about that. This man [*pointing to Glaucon*] has been attending feasts given by his heathen friends—eating polluted meat. I have evidence of it. Are we to be asked to sit down at the same table with him?

GLAUCON. There has been no clear ruling against me. Those who don't choose to sit down with me can please themselves. So [*rising*] if supper is ready for us—

JUDITH [*in despair*]. Supper is ready for us, but are *we* ready?

[*At that moment Philip bursts in from the back room, livid.*]

PHILIP [*loudly*]. Mother! Melissa has just been telling me—about Sosilas. . . . Will you ask the swine to leave?

JUDITH. My son, how *can* I—a fellow-churchman?

PHILIP. If you don't I think—God help me—I am going to kill him!

[*Consternation. Cries of "Shame!" "Brother Philip!" etc.*]

SOSILAS [*rising, on the defensive*]. You won't find that so easy, young man.

[*Philip makes a dash at him, but is restrained by his mother, joined by Chloe and Sophia. Eulalia and Lois scream. Melissa returns in alarm.*]

MELISSA. Philip! Philip!

[*Philip collapses sobbing at his mother's feet.*]

JUDITH. Oh, God, have mercy on us! [*She turns to Sophia, at the end of her resources.*] Sophie! My faith is giving out—
[*Suddenly there is a loud knock at the street-door, quite distinct from the previous knocking.*] Chloe, will you see who it is?

[*Amid a tense silence Chloe goes to the door and opens it. Titus, a dignified figure, stands without.*]

TITUS. Is this the house of Stephanas?

JUDITH [*in a trembling voice*]. I am his wife.

TITUS [*entering and introducing himself*]. Titus, a brother in the faith, from Ephesus.

JUDITH. Tell me the worst. Stephanas——?

TITUS. Is well. He sends loving greetings to you and to his son.

[*Philip scrambles to his feet, still shaking violently. Judith supports him.*]

JUDITH. Is he not returning?

TITUS. Paul has asked him to stay a few days with him.

JUDITH. Paul too is well?

TITUS. Never better! And his ministry prospering beyond all expectation, God be praised!

JUDITH. Then he will have had no time to spare——? Did he not send any message—Paul?

TITUS. He has given me a letter addressed to the Church of Corinth.

JUDITH [*joyfully*]. A letter from Paul himself! Chloe!

CHLOE. God has heard our prayer!

LOIS [*impatiently*]. Your pardon, Brother Titus. And Apollos? Is he at Ephesus still?

TITUS. Yes, sister. He is working with Paul.

LOIS. Is he not coming back to us? [*Faltering*] Some of us lately petitioned him . . . privately.

TITUS [*gravely*]. He received your petition. Paul strongly urged him to come to you, but Apollos is unwilling. He has heard with grief of things said and done in his name to undermine Paul's authority among you. He will not come to you for that reason.

EULALIA [*with unnecessary fervour*]. Praise God for that too.

JUDITH [*to Titus*]. You must be hungry, brother, after your journey.

TITUS. Thank you. I have eaten. But if I might sit among you? . . .

JUDITH. May we have Paul's letter?

TITUS. I was to deliver it into your hands.

[*He presents a scroll.*]

JUDITH [*taking it*]. Sit at ease, brother. [*He takes a chair.*] Philip! [*He goes to her.*] Will you read this letter to us?

[*She hands him the scroll.*]

PHILIP [*aghast*]. Now? Oh, Mother——

JUDITH [*peremptorily*]. Now! [*To the company*] Let us all be seated again. [*She is obeyed, with no great enthusiasm. Melissa now takes a seat beside Chloe. Sophia returns to a more isolated position.*] We are ready, Philip.

[*Philip masters his emotion after a great effort.*]

PHILIP [*in a tremulous voice, reading from the scroll*]. "Paul,

called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God unto the Church of God which is at Corinth . . ."

[The curtain descends to mark an interval of time. When it rises again Philip is concluding his reading of the letter. There is a marked change in the atmosphere. Except for Sosilas, who remains cool and detached, bored and sullen looks have given way to expressions uniformly tense and reverential. Many are in tears or on their knees. Philip's voice has acquired strength and resonance.]

"I, Paul, add this salutation in my own hand. If any man love not the Lord let him be anathema. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. And my love be with you all."

[The hand holding the scroll drops to his side. There is a chorus of "Amen." No one stirs for some moments.]

JUDITH *[quietly]*. Thank you, Philip. Will you give me the letter? *[He hands it back to her. She examines it, much moved.]* It is in your father's handwriting. *[He nods.]* Paul must have dictated it to him—all but the last sentence.

[Philip suddenly drops to his knees, buries his head in his hands.]

MELISSA *[to Chloe, in a whisper]*. Mother! That part about marriage . . . You must have told him—of Philip and me!

CHLOE. And if I did? *[Aloud]* What were Paul's words about us? "Not many wise, not many mighty, not many noble" . . . but we have been called, and we are his children. Let us give thanks for such a father, even when he chides us.

[Murmurs of assent.]

MANES *[on his knees]*. I am so ashamed of my presumption!

[On an impulse Lois rises.]

LOIS [*unsteadily*]. I can't stay now. I am going back—to my husband. . . . Forgive me, brethren.

JUDITH [*going with her to the door*]. We understand, sister.
[*She kisses her.*]

LOIS. I'll be with you all at to-morrow's meeting.

[*She adjusts her veil, and Judith lets her out.*]

ARTEMAS [*on his knees*]. Brother Glaucon, I have been hating you in my heart. Will you forgive me?

GLAUCON [*with a cry*]. Brother, but I wronged you. It is for me to ask forgiveness. The money will be returned to you.

ARTEMAS. No, no, brother, I made the bargain. I should have kept to it.

GLAUCON. It was no honest bargain. I abused your trust in me. How can I keep the money?

ARTEMAS. Let us give it to the saints' fund.

GLAUCON. If only I may have your love again.

ARTEMAS. With all my heart, brother.

[*He goes across to him, and they embrace.*]

SOSILAS [*rising with great complacency*]. Love—ah, what a comprehensive word! And how brilliantly elucidated by our spiritual father! Love, as he puts it, "suffereth all things, taketh not account of evil." Did you mark those words, Melissa? [*Philip has risen, but retains full control of himself.*]

JUDITH [*in a clear, firm voice*]. Sosilas, will you leave this house at once!

SOSILAS [*taken aback*]. What? Expel me from the church, would you? By what right? [*She holds up Paul's letter.*] I see. So that is how you understand the Apostle's message? [*With a shrug*] Well, you should know him better than I—perhaps! [*Dropping the mask*] Paul, Apollos, Peter, the great risen Messiah—shall I tell you what they are, one and all? [*He snaps his fingers.*] Just a lot of Jews! They can't fool me!

As for my weak-minded sister and her sentimental chit of a daughter, if they want to throw their lives away I'll not lift a finger for them again! I wash my hands of the lot of you!

[Snorting contempt, he marches out, slamming the door behind him.]

MELISSA *[catching Philip's eye]*. It's as though I could breathe at last!

[Eulalia is now seen to be replacing her headgear.]

EULALIA *[between sobs]*. I wouldn't do it for anyone but Paul. And I shall never open my lips at a prayer meeting again. . . . *[She struggles to control her emotion.]* If Paul says it's wrong that's enough for me. . . . But it isn't wrong, it *can't* be! . . . Paul's more important, that's all. I'd go through fire for Paul!

MANES *[fervently]*. We all would, sister.

[Chloe has gone to comfort Eulalia.]

JUDITH. Shall we hold our love-feast now? *[General assent. Only Melissa and Philip remain absorbed in each other.]* Brother Titus?

[She signs to him to lead the way.]

GLAUCON *[offering his basket to her]*. Will you accept this for the common stock, sister?

ARTEMAS *[following suit]*. Mine too!

JUDITH. Will you take them, Brother Manes? *[He obeys.]* Come, dear friends.

[She conducts the slaves, following Titus, into the back room. Chloe follows, supporting Eulalia. Then Glaucon and Artemas, arm in arm. Sophia remains unnoticed in her corner seat. Melissa slowly approaches Philip, their eyes still holding together.]

PHILIP *[softly]*. Melissa!

MELISSA *[in a whisper]*. "Let him marry her."

PHILIP *[looking away]*. I might have committed murder.

MELISSA. I might never have met you.

PHILIP. Oh, Melissa! [*Her arms are about him.*] What a fool you're marrying! [*He clasps her to him.*]

MELISSA. Just a pair of fools, aren't we?

[*Still embracing, they move slowly through the centre door. Sophia is now alone. She rises, stands irresolute for a moment, then steals across to the street-door. Judith's voice arrests her.*]

JUDITH. Sophie! [*She comes quickly in, looking anxiously about her.*] Sophie! [*She sees her.*] You were going away! Did you think I'd forgotten you?

SOPHIA. I wasn't blaming you.

JUDITH. Oh, my heart is so full! But you said you'd stay?

SOPHIA. You don't need me now.

JUDITH. Wasn't it wonderful, Sophie? And to think I nearly lost faith! I can never, never doubt again. . . . Won't you remain just the same, dear?

SOPHIA. I can't. Don't you see, it makes all the difference. It would be like treachery to Judah. . . . "As God hath called each, so let him walk." That was Paul's message to me. . . . You must go back to your guests. [*She opens the door.*]

JUDITH. Our church has come to stay, Sophie.

SOPHIA. I know that. With faith, hope, and love how could it be otherwise? Perhaps I am a little jealous of you. [*She kisses her.*] Will you remember your elder sister sometimes in your prayers?

[*She breaks away, veils herself, and goes quickly out into the night. Judith goes thoughtfully to join the love-feast.*]

CURTAIN

One of Those Letters

By Olive Conway

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CHARACTERS

LUCY REYNOLDS

RHODA }
MILDRED } *of the household staff*

ALICE REYNOLDS, *stepdaughter to Lucy*

HUBERT WITHERSON, *Lucy's lover*

EUSTACE REYNOLDS, *brother to Alice*

POLICE INSPECTOR

POSTMAN

Applications regarding amateur performances of this play should be addressed to Messrs Samuel French, Ltd., 26 Southampton Street, Strand, London, W.C.2, or 25 West 45th Street, New York

One of Those Letters

Lounge-hall of a country house; it has a lived-in appearance, and a writing-desk with telephone and some box files on the desk-top give a faintly businesslike suggestion.

The front door, standing open throughout, is centre. The foot of the stairs is seen up left: down left and right are doors. In detail the room suggests the country pursuits of its users. Light of a summer's day at 7 A.M.

As the curtain rises Rhoda, a pretty young housemaid, has been washing the presumed slab of stone outside the front door: she is on her knees. She rises and throws the water from the pail to a supposed flower-bed by the door, then enters with pail. She has been seen by Lucy Reynolds, who comes from stairs, carrying handbag, week-end case, and a letter. Lucy is thirty, and even in her present travelling clothes suggests town rather than country.

LUCY. Not that I care, but do you always get rid of the water that way?

RHODA [*evidently surprised to see Lucy, but recovering*]. Oh, yes, m'm. That's Miss Virginia's breakfast.

LUCY. Virginia?

RHODA. Creeper.

LUCY [*puts her case down*]. You don't find it a strain to be whimsical at this hour of the morning?

[*She finds cigarette in handbag and lights it.*]

RHODA. You've to let your mind roam at my job, m'm. It relieves monotony.

LUCY. Oh? Well, I'm relieving the monotony to-day.

You needn't take up my usual tea. I shan't be there. [*Blows smoke.*] Thank God for tobacco.

RHODA. Thank you, m'm. [*The thanks sound genuine.*]

LUCY. Have I given you something? You sound grateful.

RHODA. It's Wednesday.

LUCY. Yes? Is Wednesday a pet day of yours? I didn't make Wednesday, you know. Or are you being whimsical again?

RHODA [*subdued*]. No, m'm.

[*Begins to cross with pail towards left door.*]

LUCY. Tell me, Rhoda: I'm the only thing that's unusual this morning? I mean—the others, Mr Reynolds and Mr Eustace and Miss Alice? . . .

RHODA. Quite as usual, m'm. They're all out at the kennels.

LUCY [*absently*]. Yes, they're interested in kennels. [*Then to Rhoda*] That will be all, Rhoda.

RHODA. Yes, m'm. In the ordinary way my next is to do the dusting in here.

LUCY. Keep it.

RHODA. Very well, m'm.

[*At left door.*]

LUCY. Oh, Rhoda! Are there any letters?

RHODA. The postman comes about half-past eight.

LUCY. I don't know much about early morning, do I? But that's better really. Then what exactly do you do with the letters? Because half-past eight's a good idea.

RHODA. They're put on the breakfast-table, m'm. Except yours, of course.

LUCY. Then listen. I particularly want Mr Reynolds to get this letter with the others.

RHODA. There's no difficulty about that, m'm.

[*Hubert is seen for a moment scouting outside front door. Seeing Rhoda, he withdraws.*]

LUCY. Now you're sure?

RHODA. Oh, yes. I've only to put it with the rest.

LUCY. All right. I'm relying on you, Rhoda.

[Gives letter and ten-shilling note.]

RHODA. Oh, m'm, that's——

LUCY. Thank you.

[Dismisses her. Exit Rhoda left with pail. Lucy looks at wristwatch. Hubert enters by front door. He is handsome, a trifle too handsome, and possibly a year or two younger than Lucy: in travelling tweeds without hat.]

HUBERT. I'm here.

LUCY. Oh! I didn't hear the car.

HUBERT. I've left it up the drive. *[Picks up her case.]* All set?

LUCY *[stubs out cigarette]*. Aren't you going to kiss me?

HUBERT. For the rest of my life. We've not much time in hand now, you know. Imperial Airways don't wait.

LUCY. Hubert, you're an engineer. Work it out—how many yards per hour faster you'll have to drive to Croydon if you say good morning to me nicely.

HUBERT. You win. *[Puts case down, kisses her.]*

LUCY. Oh, my dear, how can you look so gorgeous at this hour? *[She holds his hands.]*

HUBERT. I don't as a rule.

LUCY. Why not?

HUBERT. I shaved early to-day. Is that something to think about? When I haven't shaved I'm one of life's awfulest facts.

LUCY. So I ought to change my mind?

HUBERT. It's your last chance.

LUCY. I'm not taking it. I'm taking you. And the rough with the smooth so long as they're with you. *[Drops his*

hands.] But I needed that kiss, my dear. This is a desperate thing we're doing.

HUBERT. That's not a new thought, Lucy. It's an old thought. It's one we've put behind us. Did you go to bed last night?

LUCY. I lay down.

HUBERT. And you didn't sleep.

LUCY. I didn't try. I wasn't going to risk not waking up.

HUBERT. I know. Same with me, as a matter of fact, but the consequence is that you've got a go of early morning jitters. I'm jittery myself. [*Hands on her shoulders*] This is zero hour for you and me, my dear. But we're not going over the top. We're stopping on top. Loving each other. Living each other.

LUCY. I always said you ought to have been a doctor. You've got the healing touch. Living each other. Yes, that's a good word, Hubert.

HUBERT [*picks up case*]. Come on, my dear. We'll live.

LUCY. We'll live. Yes, we now begin to live.

[*Exeunt by front door. In a moment Rhoda enters left. goes to front door, and looks.*]

RHODA. And it's Wednesday.

[*Turns, throws up duster, catches it, then dusts, singing loudly.*]

[*From stairs enter Mildred, a young housemaid of probably local origin: she is a less sophisticated person than Rhoda.*]

MILDRED. Hush! You're making enough noise to waken the mistress. Rhoda!

RHODA [*sings on, then*]: This is one day she woke herself. She's gone out, and I've won the bolters' sweepstake.

MILDRED. What?

RHODA. It is, I believe, Wednesday, Miss Renshaw. And I own Wednesday in the sweep.

MILDRED. Oh, Rhoda, that's——

RHODA. It's about as certain as anything could be. She's not gone alone, she and her little bag that she packed herself. He was with her.

MILDRED. You saw him? Mr Witherson?

RHODA. I watched them down the drive, my dear.

MILDRED. But that only means they've gone . . . well, for a walk early.

RHODA. She's great at early walking, isn't she? Besides, I've got the letter. I'm to put it with the rest when the post comes.

MILDRED. What letter?

RHODA. Oh, Mildred, you are backward! The letter they always write telling where to go to get evidence for the divorce.

MILDRED. Oh, dear! I don't know what to say.

[*Slumps into chair.*]

RHODA. Well, I do. Here, where's some notepaper? [*Sits at desk.*] I want to know how much we've got in the pool. There's seven of us been paying in a shilling a week, and it's five . . . yes, five weeks since we decided this was bound to happen soon. That's five sevens makes thirty-five. Thirty-five shillings. Thank you, Mrs Reynolds. Thank *you*, Mr Witherson, for not doing it till the pool held thirty-five shillings.

MILDRED. Not me. I wouldn't come in.

RHODA. I know you wouldn't. You're not romantic.

[*Throws her calculation into wastepaper-basket.*]

MILDRED. You were all so certain it would happen.

RHODA. Of course. That's why we made the sweep-stake. Not would it happen, but which day of the week.

And I drew Wednesday. [*Rising*] You're forgetting to congratulate me.

MILDRED. I always hated the idea of betting on it.

RHODA. Oh, you're too narrow-minded to live. Or else you're fond of Mr Reynolds?

MILDRED. It's not my place to be fond of the master.

RHODA. Very well, then.

MILDRED [*rising*]. But he's her husband, Rhoda. It's an awful thing for a wife to run away from her husband.

RHODA. Don't you ever read the newspapers?

MILDRED. But this isn't in the newspapers.

RHODA. Not yet.

MILDRED. It isn't like something you read about. It's here. It's happening to your own.

RHODA. They're not particularly my own. Do your work and take your wages—that's all I ever see there is in being a servant. I don't get sloppy about my employers. Yes, and if I were sloppy I'd be sloppier about her than him. She's gone to her happiness, hasn't she? And good luck to her.

MILDRED. I was never in a house before where anything like this happened.

RHODA. Nor me. But I like adventure.

MILDRED. Is this adventure? Then I don't like adventure. For one thing, we'll all have to look for fresh places.

RHODA. Why?

MILDRED. I don't know. It follows an upset, doesn't it?

RHODA. And I think different. We talked it over, and if you fancied it wasn't a nice subject and didn't care to listen that's your look-out, but I'll tell you now. Before even he married her Mr Reynolds and Miss Alice ran this house in the same big way, and we think it'll go on as it is. It'll be a matter of pride with him to show people her leaving him

hasn't upset his life. And then another thing: this isn't a country house of the real gentry. They work here, and with the stables and the kennels he can't so easily make a lot of changes. If he does it's all right. There are lashings of places going for a good housemaid, but I don't think we'll be asked to go.

MILDRED. I hope not.

RHODA. So do I. I'm interested. I've my own little ways of breaking the monotony of being a housemaid in the country, but this is a big way.

MILDRED. I wish you wouldn't say things like that about it, Rhoda.

RHODA. And why not?

MILDRED. Looking on it all as if it were a bit of fun.

RHODA. There's more than a bit of fun in thirty-five shillings. There's a lot.

MILDRED. Some day you'll feel something.

RHODA. I can have feelings without being crazy over Mr Theodore Reynolds, Esquire.

MILDRED. I'm not crazy about him, and if it comes to that the mistress is your pet.

RHODA. And you're jealous because she gave me that tweed suit. I'm more her personal maid than anyone else, so why shouldn't she?

MILDRED. I'm not jealous. I——

[In fact, they face each other closely, and a squabble impends but——

Oh!

[Enter by front door Alice, followed in a moment by her brother Eustace. Both are in breeches and bright polo shirts, and the breeches are soiled by kennel work. Eustace tends to heaviness; Alice is natty and efficient.

ALICE. Do I interrupt a conference?

[*Exit Mildred at once upstairs.*]

EUSTACE. What?

ALICE. Only two of the maids. They're always gossiping about nothing.

EUSTACE. Oh?

RHODA. Do you wish me to go, miss?

ALICE. Certainly not. Kindly get on with your work, Rhoda. [*Rhoda dusts, but up-stage, temporarily out of the picture.*] I've got all the pedigrees here.

[*To desk, takes down box file and searches in it.*]

EUSTACE [*drops lounging into chair*]. Don't rub that in. Before you came into the business it used to take Father and me hours to find a pedigree.

ALICE. Two big brainy men and neither of them had the wit to buy some files.

EUSTACE. But I'm taking half a crown off you. Sallie's great-grandmother was Helen of Troy.

ALICE. No. She was the somebody of somewhere, but you've got it wrongly.

EUSTACE. And I wouldn't put it beyond you to be right. You know much more about the dogs than I do.

ALICE. Here's Sallie.

[*Finds pedigree and brings it to him. They look at it.*]

EUSTACE. That costs me half a crown. [*He pays.*]

ALICE. Lucy of Lammermoor. [*Replacing pedigree in file*]
Lucy. There are all breeds of Lucys, aren't there?

EUSTACE. I'm in favour of being fair to them, Alice, whatever the breed. [*Rises.*]

ALICE. It's sometimes hard to be fair to your stepmother when she was at school with you.

EUSTACE. She was older than you.

ALICE. Always the same two years older.

EUSTACE. Er . . . [*Indicates Rhoda.*] We've settled the argument about Sallie. Shall we get back on the job?

ALICE. Yes: there's always the job. [*Telephone.*] I'll take it.

EUSTACE. Somebody's early.

ALICE [*at 'phone*]. Yes. . . . Yes, this is Miss Reynolds speaking. . . . I can take a message. . . . Oh, very well.

EUSTACE. Want me?

ALICE. I'm not sure. I think he wants Father.

EUSTACE. Who is it?

ALICE. He says he's the West Sussex police.

EUSTACE [*takes 'phone*]. Reynolds speaking. What is it? . . . Yes. . . . Yes. . . . Yes. . . . [*He indicates growing anxiety.*] But why ring me up about it? . . . Oh! . . . I see. . . . Yes, I'll be here. [*Puts 'phone down.*]

ALICE. What is it?

EUSTACE. He was always a fast driver, the late Hubert Witheison.

ALICE. The late . . . Hubert? Hubert killed?

RHODA. Oh!

EUSTACE [*ises and says sharply*]. You. Go upstairs and see if your mistress is in her room.

RHODA. I can——

EUSTACE. Don't you hear me?

RHODA. Yes, sir.

[*Exit Rhoda by stair.*]

ALICE. Lucy?

EUSTACE. There's a woman with Hubert. They're . . . they're both dead.

ALICE. But why do they——?

EUSTACE. One of the constables thinks he recognizes her. Oh, I don't believe it. Is it likely? Lucy's never been known to get out of bed before nine o'clock. And it's at Horam—eight miles away. How should a constable at Horam recognize Lucy? Some meddling oaf with a gift of imagination and——

ALICE. What are they doing?

EUSTACE. There's a police car on its way here. They want me to go to . . .

ALICE. To correct the mistake.

EUSTACE. They don't want me actually. They thought I was Father speaking. They'll want him.

ALICE. Oh, my dear! Father!

EUSTACE. This will about break Father—if it's true.

ALICE. Can't we protect him? Can't we think of——?

[*Eustace silences her as Rhoda returns by stair.*]

EUSTACE. Well?

RHODA. The mistress is not in her room, sir.

EUSTACE. You haven't looked anywhere else. You've not had time.

RHODA. No, sir, but——

EUSTACE. Right. Clear out.

RHODA. Yes, sir. It's only that I——

ALICE [*opens right door*]. Rhoda.

RHODA. Yes, miss.

ALICE. I want you to go into the drawing-room and to wait there till I send for you. You can sit down.

RHODA. Very well, miss.

[*Exit Rhoda right. Alice closes door.*]

ALICE. No need to start the servants talking—yet.

EUSTACE. That's a bit of quick thinking. The servants and, worse than them, the golf club. This'll be meat and drink to them at the golf club. Poor old Reynolds, the man who couldn't hold his wife.

ALICE. Oh, Eustace, don't.

EUSTACE. Well, there it is.

ALICE. No! Eustace, we don't positively know that it is Lucy.

EUSTACE. I think we do.

ALICE. And if it is she went out for an early spin with our friend Mr Witherson. You and I knew all about it. We were there when they arranged it. Lucy wasn't in the habit of getting up early, so she thought that just for once it would be fun to go out for a run before breakfast. That's the story.

EUSTACE. If we can put that over it'll save face all round. Yes, why shouldn't they let us do it? It's better for every one. Better for Dad. Better for Lucy.

ALICE. Oh, Lucy.

EUSTACE. Yes, we'll have less stony-heartedness about Lucy. I don't think Lucy was a light woman. She was driven unbearably before she did a thing like this. And he killed her, and I can't wring Hubert Witherson's neck for killing her because Hubert Witherson is dead.

ALICE. She was bored, Eustace.

EUSTACE. That doesn't sound much.

ALICE. Oh, yes. I haven't been often bored myself, but often enough to know that boredom's a pain. We're horses and dogs, and Lucy wasn't. I don't know if she really tried or not, but she took no interest in the interests of this house. She was a Londoner and a stranger here, and she never stopped being a stranger. Dad——

EUSTACE. We can't touch that. We can't discuss Father.

ALICE. No. But she was bored. You're not responsible for your actions when you're bored.

EUSTACE. Well, that's being more human about her than you were. And she's dead just when . . . Yes, you can say what you like, but this is tough on Lucy. . . . [*Sound of car.*] Is that the car?

ALICE [*to front door*]. Yes; a quiet one. Father won't hear that down at the kennels.

EUSTACE. No. That's our good start. [*To front door*] Will you come in, inspector?

INSPECTOR. Thank you. [*Looks round.*] Is Mr Reynolds available?

EUSTACE. I'm here to represent my father.

INSPECTOR. I need him personally, sir.

EUSTACE. Inspector, I am representing my father. There are urgent reasons.

INSPECTOR. I won't press it for the moment. Do you wish to give me some information?

ALICE. Won't you sit down?

INSPECTOR. Thank you. [*Sits.*] Now, sir, if you please.

EUSTACE. The first thing to say is that I took your message.

INSPECTOR. I recognized the voice, sir.

EUSTACE. Yes. Well, up to now we've not told our father, Inspector, is it certain? The—the identity, I mean.

INSPECTOR. Officially, sir, it won't be certain till the dead lady has been identified by her nearest relative—that is, by Mr Reynolds. [*Alice draws in a shuddering breath.*]

EUSTACE. And you've only a constable who thought——

INSPECTOR. No, sir. We've more than that. I'm afraid there's no doubt. [*Rises.*]

EUSTACE. Why?

INSPECTOR [*produces passport*]. Do you identify that?

ALICE. Her passport!

EUSTACE [*takes it: he and Alice look, then he pockets it*]. Yes.

ALICE. Of course, that was a fad of hers, always to have her passport in her bag. So she had it even when she was only out for a drive with a family friend. We knew all about the drive, you know. We heard them arranging it. We were there, my brother and I, when it was fixed up.

INSPECTOR. Is that so?

ALICE. We'll swear to it.

INSPECTOR. I see. Do you happen to know if Mr Witherson had the same habit of always carrying his passport?

ALICE. Oh!

INSPECTOR. We'd to go a little further than his driving-licence to establish identity. He had his passport in his pocket and [*eyes Alice*] two Airways tickets for to-day through to Budapest. The contents of their bags, which were scattered by the crash, also suggested——

EUSTACE. You needn't go on.

INSPECTOR. No, sir. Miss Reynolds' remarks about that passport provoked me a little.

ALICE. I'm sorry.

INSPECTOR. Naturally the police drew a certain inference.

EUSTACE. They would.

INSPECTOR. Yes, sir. Although Miss Reynolds hoped that the police were stupid. That was one misapprehension, and you may be under a second misapprehension.

EUSTACE. Why?

INSPECTOR. In the matter of the inquest.

ALICE. Oh, that's—— [*Eustace grips her hand.*]

INSPECTOR. The business of the coroner is to inquire into the cause of death. The cause in this case is only too clear, and the accident was witnessed. Mr Witherson was speeding rashly, and it's a sharp corner. He simply drove straight into the wall. The deaths must have been instantaneous. That's always some relief.

EUSTACE. Yes. And the coroner. He's not going to ask why they were there? Aren't coroners sometimes—well . . . inquisitive?

ALICE. You see our object, inspector. It's going to be a dreadful shock to our father to know that Lucy's dead, and if on top of that he has to know that she . . .

INSPECTOR. Quite so, miss.

ALICE. I simply don't know what it would do to him.

INSPECTOR. Well, Miss Reynolds, if you care to tell him the story you tried to tell me about an early morning drive that you know was arranged it'll be no business of the police to contradict you. And if I privately tell the coroner the facts you can rely on it that he'll ask no awkward questions.

ALICE. Eustace, he's on our side.

INSPECTOR. I'm on the side of causing no unnecessary pain. The same applies to Mr Witherson's mother.

ALICE. I hadn't thought of her.

INSPECTOR. No, miss. A highly respected lady. [*To Eustace*] You'd better put that passport back where it's usually kept. It's in your pocket at the moment.

ALICE. Oh! The bag!

INSPECTOR. The bag?

ALICE. He'll go into her room, and her brushes and things won't be there.

INSPECTOR. Yes, that's a difficulty. The way of the best-intentioned conspirators is not easy. Where is Mr Reynolds now?

EUSTACE. Either in the stables or the kennels. He won't come in till breakfast-time. That's nine o'clock.

INSPECTOR. All right. We'll make a clean job of it. [*Looks at watch.*] There's plenty of time for me to take you now and get that bag. Then I bring you back, and I interview Mr Reynolds as if I hadn't already been here. And you replace the articles meantime.

ALICE. You really are a sportsman. Shall we go?

INSPECTOR. You feel sure Mr Reynolds will not come in till nine?

EUSTACE. That's the routine.

INSPECTOR. Then I think, miss, that a young lady visiting

a police-station in such circumstances would be more properly dressed in a skirt.

ALICE. Oh! Yes, I see.

EUSTACE. I'd better put a jacket on. Anything else, inspector?

INSPECTOR. No, sir. Except that if there's a cup of tea actually going——

ALICE. There usually is. [Rings.]

INSPECTOR. I'd be obliged. It's before breakfast with me too, and with all this happening a cup of tea would be a comfort.

ALICE. You've had to look at a shattering sight.

INSPECTOR. Don't think of it, miss. [Enter Mildred left.]

ALICE. Mildred, is tea ready now in the kitchen?

MILDRED. Yes, miss. We're just sitting down to——

ALICE. All right. Bring some at once to the inspector. And biscuits. Be quick.

MILDRED. Yes, miss. [Exit Mildred.]

ALICE. I'll change now. [Towards stair, then stops.] Oh! There's that other girl in there, Eustace. She'll be . . . [To Inspector] We put her there because she knew Lucy had gone out, and we didn't want her talking to the other servants.

INSPECTOR. It's beyond human power to prevent servants from talking, miss. But all right. I'll have a word with them to put their talking on the right lines. If they get the facts from me they'll be the facts.

EUSTACE. I shall never know how to thank you for all this.

INSPECTOR. Not at all, sir. I believe in being thorough.

[Enter Mildred left with tea. Alice opens right door.]

ALICE. Thank you for waiting, Rhoda. [Leaves door open. To Inspector] I won't take a minute.

[Exeunt by stairs Alice and Eustace. Enter Rhoda right.]

MILDRED. Do you take sugar?

INSPECTOR [*sits*]. Two lumps. [*Rhoda is crossing to left.*] You needn't go. I've . . . I've had to come here to bring bad news. There's been a motoring accident involving Mrs Reynolds. I'm sorry to say she's dead.

MILDRED. Dead!

RHODA. But that's not possible! People don't die because they go off to——

INSPECTOR. I'm sorry, but it's true. She's dead, and the friend she was out with for a run in his car is also dead—Mr Witherson.

RHODA. But I saw her this morning. She looked so happy. [*Sits.*] Oh, I didn't think things could happen like this. I didn't know it could be so cruel——

INSPECTOR. It's like that with these accidents.

MILDRED. It ought not to be. Whatever she was doing, she didn't deserve to die.

RHODA [*whose emotion was brief*]. Oh! I've just thought of something. Will there be an inquest?

INSPECTOR. Certainly.

RHODA. And I might get my photograph in the papers. Oh!

INSPECTOR. I don't see any reason.

RHODA. Won't I have to be a witness?

INSPECTOR. Why on earth should you be a witness?

RHODA. On account of the letter.

INSPECTOR. What letter?

RHODA. The letter she gave me to give to Mr Reynolds. It's her good-bye letter.

INSPECTOR. What? [*Rises: he sees the whole edifice of good will crashing: only partly does he succeed in concealing his feelings.*] Oh, yes. You've got this letter? [*Rhoda nods.*] And she told you what's in it?

RHODA. Not told me, but of course we all know about it.
INSPECTOR. Who do you mean by "all"?

RHODA. All of us. Why, we've got a sweepstake about which day they'd bolt, and I've won it because it's Wednesday to-day.

INSPECTOR [*bitterly*]. It's a sporting house, this.

MILDRED. Not me. I wouldn't go in.

INSPECTOR. Just let me understand this. There's been common gossip in the kitchen about Mrs Reynolds and Mr Witherson?

RHODA. I don't know what you mean by "common."

INSPECTOR. No? Then I'll tell you. Have you girls ever heard of the law of slander?

RHODA. We've been proved right. They did bolt.

INSPECTOR. You'd better be careful, my girl. People are sent to prison for slander. Don't forget that now. You've been warned by the police.

MILDRED. I'm sure I'll never mention it again. I never believed it of them.

INSPECTOR [*to Rhoda*]. Did you hear that? You never believed it either.

RHODA. What about my sweepstake money? I'm not going to go without that, and if they didn't bolt there's no sweepstake. But they did bolt, whatever you say; and the letter will prove it. [*Postman with bicycle appears in doorway.*]

POSTMAN. Post, miss. Quite a lot to-day. [*Rhoda receives letters. Postman sees inspector.*] Hullo! What's this?

INSPECTOR. Mind your own business.

POSTMAN. Well, it's a fine day for the police.

INSPECTOR. It's variable. [*Exit postman.*]

RHODA. Now! [*Takes letter from her apron pocket.*] That's the letter, see? And I'm doing what Mrs Reynolds told me to do. I'm putting it with the rest so that he'll get it when he

comes in. That's going to show who's right, and I'm stopping here watching to see that he does get it.

INSPECTOR. The police don't destroy other people's letters, my girl.

RHODA. No? Well, that's the only way he won't get this one.

INSPECTOR [*paces a step, then*]: What did Mrs Reynolds do to you to make you hate her so bitterly?

RHODA. I don't know that I——

MILDRED. I should think not. The mistress never gave the rest of us things like she gave Rhoda. A tweed suit and——

RHODA. You can't get over that suit, can you?

INSPECTOR. She was kind to you.

RHODA [*grudgingly*]. M'yes. She never gave me anything till she'd no further use for it herself. I liked her well enough—for an employer.

INSPECTOR. You know, I'd like to believe this about that letter. I'd like to believe it's something quite trivial, just a reminder to Mr Reynolds that she was going out early with Mr Witherson. [*Rhoda indicates scepticism.*] But if it's what you think it is you're going to put an ugly stain on the memory of a lady who was kind to you. You're going to torture Mr Reynolds by telling him something he didn't know—and now the lady's dead it's something he need never know. Personally, if I'd that much power for evil put into my hands I know what I'd do about it. It's not for me to tell you what to do. It isn't for the police to watch you doing it. But if that letter did not exist there's only the fact that Mrs Reynolds and Mr Witherson went out early for a drive in his car and met with a fatal accident. That's all there'd be to it, and people who talked otherwise would be talking slander, and so they wouldn't talk. [*After which highly incorrect effort he gulps tea.*]

When Miss Reynolds comes down you can tell her I'm waiting for her in the car.

[Exit inspector centre. Rhoda stands silent.]

MILDRED. Rhoda!

RHODA. Don't pester me. I'm thinking. Gosh, for once in my life I'm somebody. I've got—power.

[She takes the letter in her hand.]

MILDRED. Rhoda, you—— *[Grasps her arm as Rhoda moves left.]* What are you doing with that letter?

RHODA. Keep your hands off me, Mildred Renshaw. There's a fire in the kitchen, I believe. *[Goes left.]*

CURTAIN

Nicodemus

By Joe Corrie

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CHARACTERS

JONATHAN GREENWELL, *a country joiner*

MATILDA GREENWELL, *his wife*

NICODEMUS GREENWELL, *their son*

MR GILES, *the vicar*

LUKE GREENWELL, *Jonathan's father*

EMMA HOLLYCOCK, *a neighbour*

Applications regarding amateur performances of this play should be addressed to Messrs J. B. Pinker and Son, Talbot House, Arundel Street, Strand, London, W.C.2, or to the Baker International Play Bureau (agents for U.S.A. and Canada), 178 Tremont Street, Boston, U.S.A.

Nicodemus

The scene is the living-room of Jonathan's cottage on the outskirts of the little village of Holly Rise.

The furniture is quite old, and the room has the appearance of being over-furnished. There is a good deal of curtain and lace material, and more flowers than is actually good for them, or the occupants. But there is an excuse, for it is the wedding morn of their son, Nicodemus.

As a play of this kind is better done in the dialect of the district where it is to be performed, so it is better furnished after the style of the district too. Therefore this is left to the producer.

There are two doors in the room, one which leads to a passage and porch, and one to a bedroom. The latter may be at the back of the left wall, and the former at the front of the right wall.

When the curtain rises Jonathan is struggling to get a stud through a stiff collar. He wears his very best clothes and doesn't seem at all comfortable in them. The boots he wears are only worn on special occasions, and it is quite evident that his corns aren't comfortable.

Jonathan is the village joiner, a strong-looking man of over fifty years, ruddy of face, with a small tuft of a beard. He is minus his coat.

Matilda, who enters from outside as Jonathan utters an exasperated "Damn," is also wearing her very best black. She is a woman of about the same age as Jonathan, but more refined-looking.

MATILDA. Do you want help with that stud, Jonathan?

JONATHAN. Well, it would be a bit more matrimonial-looking, don't ye think? [*He puffs and blows after the exertion, then holds out his neck so that Matilda can get to the stud.*] I never did agree with all this starch and stiffness for occasions, but—— You'll never manage to get that through with your fingers, Matilda; they're just made of flesh and bone, not steel. What you want is a hairpin. [*Matilda goes to the dresser and opens a drawer.*] Weddings and funerals do scare me these days. . . . Wasn't so bad when my fingers were young and tough, but they're too soft and tender now. . . . Why it is that every one should dress so stiffly for weddings and funerals I don't know. [*Shifting from one foot to the other.*] I should have had them boots on yesterday to bend them a bit. . . . Had to be threatening rain to-morrow, too, of course, to make things more difficult.

[*He sits for a moment to ease his feet. Matilda holds up a hairpin.*

MATILDA. Will this one do, Jonathan?

JONATHAN. You'll need an old-fashioned one, Matilda—something that'll stand the strain. . . . Like everything else, boots aren't the same as what they used to be. . . . I don't hear Nicodemus making much noise. *He* must be getting on all right.

[*Matilda goes to him with the hairpin. He rises, still complaining of his corns. She proceeds to insert the hairpin.*

Be careful, Matilda. I can remember my father losing nearly a square inch of skin from his neck once when—— [*He is too late with his warning.*] Matilda! . . . Matilda! You're choking . . . me! Take it out again—quick!

[*Matilda does so and retreats a few steps, quite upset by the shock. It takes Jonathan a few seconds to get his breath back.*

You ought to be more careful, Matilda. There's an art in getting hold of the *head* of the stud and no more. But you don't have your glasses on! How d'ye expect to perform such a delicate operation without spectacles? Put them on, Matilda.

MATILDA. I can see well enough, Jonathan; it's my hand that's too shaky—the excitement is doing it. Don't be angry, Jonathan; I'm not my natural self to-day.

JONATHAN. I'm not angry, Matilda, just pained. . . . Now take time and collect your senses—there's no desperate hurry. [*Illustrating with his thumb and forefinger how the job should be done*] Just get hold of the stud head nice and easy, then give it a gentle twist when ye have got it through the collar. It's quite easy when you know how. . . . Take plenty of time . . . plenty of time. [*Matilda makes another attempt.*] Easy now—easy! Oo! . . . [*Matilda steps back a pace, leaving the hairpin in the collar.*] It's all right, Matilda, all right. I just thought ye were going to twist too quickly. Easy now, easy; there's plenty of time. [*Matilda manages to get the stud through.*] That's right this time, Matilda. [*Gives his neck a twist or two.*] Now I'll get my coat on and I'll be ready for any eventualities. [*Puts on his coat while Matilda goes to the dresser with the hairpin.*] Nicodemus is going about his dressing very quietly, isn't he? Cool as a cucumber as usual. I don't think an earthquake would upset Nicodemus. [*Jonathan wriggles himself till satisfied that the coat is hanging properly.*] Not so stout as I used to be, Matilda. Two years ago at Mother's funeral I felt this coat a bit tight at the shoulders—remember? [*He selects a flower from one of the vases and puts it in his buttonhole.*] Does that look all right, Matilda?

MATILDA. I think so.

JONATHAN [*now a bit more comfortable*]. Flowers for weddings—the symbol of happiness. [*Sighs.*] We'll miss Nicodemus, too, Matilda—he's been a good son to us.

MATILDA. Yes, we'll—we'll miss him, Jonathan.

[She is near to tears.]

JONATHAN *[patting her on the shoulder]*. No tears, Matilda, no tears. Remember that he's getting a good wife in Rebecca Hollycock, and he's marrying respectable, thank God. I'll go and see how he's getting on. Perhaps he's stuck with his collar. *[Before he goes to the room he pats Matilda on the shoulder.]* I know how you feel, Matilda, I know how you feel. My mother was the same when I got wed, exactly the same.

[He goes off to the room. Matilda has a little weep to herself. Jonathan is no sooner gone than he returns in an excited state.]

Matilda! There's no Nicodemus in there!

MATILDA *[astonished]*. He isn't there?

JONATHAN. No. His wedding clothes are still lying on the bed where ye left them; and the bottom half of the window is wide open.

MATILDA. Where can he have gone?

JONATHAN. I don't know.

MATILDA. *Why* has he gone?

JONATHAN. I've no idea!

[They look at each other for a moment, astounded.]

He went in there to get ready, didn't he?

MATILDA. Yes.

JONATHAN. Well, he isn't there. He's gone out the window.

MATILDA. You'll have to go and look for him, Jonathan. He hasn't too much time now.

JONATHAN. But where can I look for him?

MATILDA. He may be in the cowshed, Jonathan. The old shorthorn isn't keeping too well.

JONATHAN. And does a sick cow come before his own wedding?

MATILDA. You know how strange Nicodemus is at times, Jonathan.

JONATHAN [*angry*]. Nicodemus is a damned fool. Twenty minutes to his wedding time and he isn't to be seen. . . . Damn him, that's what I say!

MATILDA. Don't get angry, Jonathan; the poor boy may just be excited. You know how trying it is. I can remember yourself on your own wedding morn as pale as a lily and trembling like a leaf.

JONATHAN. Yes, but I was *there*—and in *time*. . . . Twenty minutes—look!—and no word of him. [*He goes to the outside door and shouts.*] Nicodemus! . . . *Nicodemus!*

MATILDA. Oh, my poor boy. [*Jonathan returns.*] Do you see him, Jonathan?

JONATHAN. Coming over from the cowshed he is, with his hands deep in his pockets and not seeming to care a damn.

MATILDA. Jonathan, dear, don't swear like that; it isn't done on a wedding morning.

JONATHAN [*to get it off his chest*]. Damn! Damn! *Damn!*
[*Nicodemus enters quite leisurely. He is a strong, easy-going, rather surly-looking fellow of thirty years of age. He wears working clothes, the clothes of a farm worker, for he attends to the little holding which is part of their livelihood.*

Have ye forgotten the time?

NICODEMUS [*calmly*]. No.

JONATHAN. Then you'll know that there's only twenty minutes to spare—and to get to the church at that?

NICODEMUS. Yes.

JONATHAN. Then why aren't ye dressing?

NICODEMUS. I've changed my mind.

JONATHAN [*astounded*]. You've what?

NICODEMUS. I don't think I'll get married after all.

[This comes as a shock to the parents.]

JONATHAN. Ye don't think you'll . . . get married after all?

NICODEMUS. No.

JONATHAN. Ye—don't—think—ye'll—get—married?

NICODEMUS. That's what I said.

JONATHAN. Why not?

NICODEMUS. I've just changed my mind.

[He sits and stretches his legs quite leisurely. Jonathan stands looking down on him. Matilda is too astonished to speak.]

JONATHAN. Why have ye changed your mind?

NICODEMUS. I'm not in the mood for it this morning.

JONATHAN *[who can't believe his own ears]*. You're not in the mood to get married?

NICODEMUS. No.

JONATHAN. Don't ye realize, Nicodemus Greenwell, that all arrangements have been made for you marrying Rebecca Hollycock in the church at eleven o'clock?

NICODEMUS. Yes.

JONATHAN. And that everybody invited will be there at that time?

NICODEMUS. I suppose they will.

JONATHAN. Yet you're not in the mood for it?

NICODEMUS. Honestly I'm not.

MATILDA. Oh, my poor boy!

JONATHAN. Look here, Nicodemus, you're going to church this morning and taking Rebecca for your wife if I have to wheel you there in a barrow.

[Nicodemus rises.]

NICODEMUS. What's that?

JONATHAN. You're going to church, see, if I have to . . .

[Nicodemus is now in a threatening attitude, and Jonathan retreats from him a few steps.]

NICODEMUS. If ye have to what?

MATILDA. Jonathan, you're only upsetting the lad.

JONATHAN. Upsetting him! And what about me? What about you? What about poor Rebecca and her folks? What about the scandal? What about folk's tongues?

NICODEMUS. Folk don't matter nothing to me.

JONATHAN. And doesn't Rebecca?

NICODEMUS. Not much.

JONATHAN. Not much! In the name o' God what's happened to ye?

NICODEMUS [*sitting*]. Nothing.

JONATHAN. You're well enough, are ye?

NICODEMUS. Quite well, thank ye.

JONATHAN. Then what is wrong?

NICODEMUS. I've just changed my mind, that's all.

MATILDA. But ye can't change your mind now, Nicodemus. What about Rebecca?

NICODEMUS. She can wait till my mind changes back again.

JONATHAN [*wiping his forehead*]. Well, of all the things to happen . . . [*To Matilda*] What are we going to do?

MATILDA. You'll have to tell the vicar, Jonathan.

JONATHAN. Ay, that's what I'll do. [*To Nicodemus*] I'll get the vicar to ye, my lad, and he'll soon let ye understand where ye are. [*Going out*] Changed my mind! Fifteen minutes before the time! . . . It must be madness—madness!

[*Jonathan hurries out, still mopping his forehead. Nicodemus whistles, a slow monotonous tune such as "No Place Like Home." Matilda looks at him rather sadly.*]

MATILDA. Don't ye think it would be wiser to make up your mind, Nicodemus, and save the vicar from rebuking ye? [*Nicodemus just shakes his head in reply, whistling the while.*] It'll be a terrible talk in the place, Nicodemus—ye know how

the folk of Holly Rise can gossip and make up stories. [*He just keeps whistling and makes no reply.*] Did something happen between you and Rebecca last night? [*Nicodemus keeps on whistling, but answers in the negative by shaking his head again.*] But something must have happened, Nicodemus.

NICODEMUS. No, nothing happened.

MATILDA. My poor boy, it's just the excitement, isn't it? Go and get your clothes on and save any trouble.

NICODEMUS. I don't like the look of her.

MATILDA. Who? Rebecca?

NICODEMUS. No, the cow. I think we should get the vet. along to see her.

MATILDA. But a cow doesn't matter on a morning like this, Nicodemus.

NICODEMUS. It does to me.

MATILDA. The folk'll be beginning to gather at church, Nicodemus.

NICODEMUS. I suppose they will.

MATILDA. And they're never suspecting that there won't be a wedding.

NICODEMUS. No; it'll be a big surprise to them.

MATILDA. And poor Rebecca will be all dressed now and just sitting looking at the clock.

NICODEMUS. Yes, she'll be looking at the clock.

MATILDA. But ye can't be so cruel as wound her heart like this, Nicodemus?

NICODEMUS. She'll get over it in time.

MATILDA. Won't ye go on with it for my sake, Nicodemus?

NICODEMUS. No.

MATILDA. Not for the sake of your own mother?

NICODEMUS. No.

MATILDA. But won't ye be afraid to face the folk if ye don't get wed, Nicodemus?

NICODEMUS. No.

MATILDA. You're quite sure? It's a horrible thing to have every one looking at ye and talking about ye.

NICODEMUS. I don't mind.

MATILDA. The vicar *will* be angry, Nicodemus.

NICODEMUS. It isn't possible.

MATILDA. He'll speak about ye in church on Sunday.

NICODEMUS. Well, it'll be the first time he'll have had *something* to speak about.

[*There is a knock on the door, and Emma Hollycock enters. She is a stoutish lady, red of face, and perspiring. She is dressed in light material, very gay, and is full of high spirits.*]

EMMA. Isn't it a God's blessing that the weather is so fine this morning, Mrs Greenwell? Would ye believe it, I'm as excited this morning as if I were to be the bride. I can't rest a moment. I'm all a-flutter with the excitement of it. And Rebecca looks so lovely, too—just like a picture in a fairy-story book. And the darling is so nervous and excited and all worked up, hot and bothered—— [*Then she sees that there is something wrong.*] What's the matter, Mrs Greenwell?

MATILDA. Nicodemus isn't wanting to be married this morning. [*Emma nearly faints with the shock.*]

EMMA. Ain't wanting to be married? [*Nicodemus shakes his head once more.*] But what's happened, Nicodemus?

NICODEMUS. Nothing.

EMMA. Oh, what a scandal! . . . What a sensation! . . . What a disappointment! . . . After me spending three whole pounds preparing for this wedding, and it ain't coming off! Nicodemus Greenwell, think shame of yourself. Think black, burning shame——

MATILDA [*interrupting*]. Emma Hollycock, will ye hold

your tongue? My poor boy doesn't want to hear you talk on and on like that. He wants peace.

EMMA. Peace! And d'ye think he'll get it? D'ye think his conscience will rest at peace when he knows that he has broken the heart of poor Rebecca? Poor soul, the shock will be enough to kill her. Nicodemus Greenwell, you're a villain, you're a monster, you're a blackguard and a scoundrel. [*In tears*] Oh, poor Rebecca sitting down there all dressed up like a fairy, and . . . now there's to be no wedding. What's your reason?

NICODEMUS. I'm not in the mood for weddings this morning.

EMMA. Why not?

NICODEMUS. Just because I'm not.

EMMA. I must go and break the news to poor Rebecca. She'll faint in her father's arms, I know she will—faint as stiff as a poker and perhaps die in his hands. . . . Poor, poor Rebecca . . . And she's such a sweet girl, too—such a treasure for any man. But I've always said, Nicodemus Greenwell, that ye were never fit to blacken her shoes. Now I know it—now everybody will soon know it, ye scurvy, low, mean—clodhopper!

[She is about to go out when Jonathan and the vicar enter.]

JONATHAN. Where are you going?

EMMA. To break the news to poor Rebecca.

JONATHAN. If there's any news to be broken Mr Giles'll do it. You stay here till you're told to go.

[So she sits down. Jonathan takes up his stand with his elbow leaning on the dresser. Matilda is trembling with the anxiety of the occasion. The vicar enters, full of confidence. He is middle-aged, of thoughtful appearance.]

VICAR. Good morning, Nicodemus!

NICODEMUS. Morning.

VICAR. Your father has just told me about your rather unexpected decision.

NICODEMUS. Yes.

VICAR. Of course you're not serious, Nicodemus. You don't really mean it?

NICODEMUS. No?

VICAR. Of course not. You're a man whom we all respect for your uprightness and good common sense. I can well understand what has happened to you, Nicodemus. It's just the excitement—a little overstrung. I have known it to happen to people before—affected them in the very same way. You have no real reason for your action?

NICODEMUS. No.

VICAR. I told you so. Now if you just start and get ready, Nicodemus, I'm quite certain that you will return to normal. There's nothing to be ashamed of, nothing at all. It was just the other week that I read in the paper of a professor—a professor, mark you, and a highly intelligent man—who was affected in the same way—could give no reason, no earthly reason at all. And eventually when he was persuaded to go through with the ceremony he was surprised that he had behaved in such a manner. Now you just get into your clothes, Nicodemus, and I'll wait here until you're ready.

[The vicar smiles, thinking he has persuaded Nicodemus, and Jonathan is almost certain that he has. But Nicodemus doesn't stir a single muscle.]

NICODEMUS. I don't feel in the mood.

[Jonathan shows his exasperation. Poor Matilda has reached the stage when she doesn't know what's happening to them all.]

VICAR [*again in a nice persuasive manner*]. There is nothing in the ceremony, Nicodemus, that is likely to upset you.

NICODEMUS. It won't, 'cause I won't be there.

[*Jonathan is now tearing into the flesh of his hands with his finger-nails. Emma is looking at Nicodemus with a glance that would kill. Matilda can only look helplessly at her poor boy, who isn't in the least perturbed. The vicar coughs, and we can hear a slight annoyance in the cough.*]

VICAR. You realize, of course, Nicodemus, that you will cause a good deal of pain and suffering to all concerned if you persist in this attitude?

NICODEMUS. They'll get over it.

VICAR. Not only so, but there may arise a good deal of ill-feeling?

NICODEMUS. It'll pass off in time.

JONATHAN. Look here, Nicodemus——

[*The vicar holds up his hand to Jonathan.*]

VICAR. It's all right, Mr Greenwell, it's all right. I understand perfectly what has happened to Nicodemus. It is just a phase which will pass if we persevere. [*Jonathan looks at Nicodemus, grinding his teeth.*] It is a fear, Nicodemus, which is born of nervous excitement.

NICODEMUS. Fear? What for? I'm not afeared of anything.

VICAR. You don't think so, Nicodemus, but you are. You see, that's your trouble. You don't think there's anything wrong with you——

NICODEMUS. There ain't.

JONATHAN. And there ain't!

[*The vicar again holds up his hand to Jonathan.*]

EMMA. I know what's wrong with him. It's because he's——

[*The vicar holds up his hand rather sternly at Emma, and she shuts up.*

VICAR [*rather sternly*]. Nicodemus, you can already see how unpopular you are becoming by adopting this attitude.

NICODEMUS. I don't care.

VICAR. Then I'm afraid I must adopt an even sterner attitude with you.

NICODEMUS [*with eyes towards ceiling*]. Waste of time.

EMMA. Thinks he has Rebecca on a string tied to his little finger, he does. [*Sarcastic*] Not this morning, Rebecca, dear, but some other morning when I'm in the mood. . . . Eh! I could scratch your eyes out, Nicodemus.

VICAR. Now, now, Miss Hollycock, we can't have that kind of talk here. If you can't keep your temper will you please go outside?

EMMA [*rising*]. Of course I'll go and tell every one what's happened.

JONATHAN. You'll sit here till I tell ye to go.

[*And Jonathan bars her way to the door.*

MATILDA. My poor boy, what you're coming through. . . . Won't you listen to Mr Giles, Nicodemus—for my sake?

NICODEMUS. I've been listening.

EMMA. Yes, in one ear and out t'other.

VICAR [*angry*]. I must ask you again, Miss Hollycock, to hold your peace. This is a very trying situation for us all, and we don't want any hindrance.

EMMA. Very well, I'll hold my peace; but if I had anything to do with him I know what I'd do—I'd—— Carry on.

VICAR [*to Nicodemus*]. To-morrow, Nicodemus, you'll be a very sad and disillusioned man. You understand, of course, that if you fail Miss Hollycock to-day you'll lose her for ever.

[*Nicodemus doesn't believe this, and shakes his head.*

NICODEMUS. Not a bit of it.

VICAR. Oh, but you will. And, mark you, you will lose a very excellent woman.

EMMA. Too damned good for *him*, anyway.

VICAR [*shocked*]. Miss Hollycock!

EMMA. I'm her aunt, the only aunt she has, and I'm going to stick up for her.

VICAR. Very well, very well. [*To Nicodemus*] Now just go and get into your clothes, Nicodemus, and we'll all wait patiently till you're ready. If the ceremony is a few minutes late it won't really matter. We can get a message sent down to Miss Hollycock that you have been delayed. Or you can put the blame on me if you wish.

JONATHAN. Now, there's an offer for ye, Nicodemus—Mr Giles is prepared to take the blame of the whole thing being late.

MATILDA. Please, Nicodemus.

NICODEMUS. For the last time—*no*!

[*The vicar rises in anger.*]

VICAR. Nicodemus! Are you aware that the Lord will punish you for this? . . . Have you no feeling in your breast for the woman who has consented to be your wife? Have you no respect for your parents—no honour—no . . . ?

NICODEMUS. No.

VICAR [*to Jonathan, giving up the sponge*]. I'm sorry, Mr Greenwell, but I can do no more.

[*They are all looking at Nicodemus in their different ways when the door opens and Luke enters. Luke is a man of eighty years, small of stature, but as sharp as a needle. He is dressed for the wedding, but he must have shrunk quite a bit since the suit was made for him. He enters like a little whirlwind.*]

LUKE. Ah, well, here we are again—here we are again.

A sunny morning in June and a wedding. What is there on the face of this earth that can gladden the heart like them two things? Nicodemus, my lad, there's only one thing I regret this morning, and that is that I'm not Nicodemus Greenwell. A morning like this, with a girl like Rebecca Hollycock for a bride—why, I'd be standing on my head and kicking my heels in the air with sheer joy. But why aren't ye dressed, Nicodemus? [*To Jonathan*] Isn't it about time for the wedding, Jonathan?

JONATHAN. There ain't going to be any wedding, Father.

LUKE. No wedding?

NICODEMUS. No.

LUKE. Why not?

JONATHAN [*sarcastically*]. He ain't in the mood.

VICAR. Nicodemus has refused absolutely, Mr Greenwell, to go on with it.

EMMA. I know what he wants—I know what he should get. I know——

NICODEMUS. Oh, shut up!

EMMA. I won't shut up. I'm the aunt of poor Rebecca and——

VICAR. Please, Miss Hollycock, your voice is so very loud.

LUKE [*astonished*]. Ain't going to get married? [*More deliberately*] Ain't going to get married? Morning in June, pretty girl like Rebecca, and you ain't going to get married?

NICODEMUS. Why should I?

LUKE. Why should roses bloom? Why should birds sing? Why should the sun shine? Because it's natural, that's why. [*Nicodemus shakes his head in disagreement.*] Ye don't believe me?

NICODEMUS. No, I don't.

LUKE. What's wrong with you, Nicodemus, and always has been, is that ye have no imagination.

NICODEMUS. No what?

LUKE. Imagination. You're just a log of wood. [*Looking straight at Nicodemus*] Not wanting to get married . . . a man of your age—on a morning like this—to Rebecca Hollycock, whom any man with imagination would run off with, ye fool, because a wedding was too slow a way to get her.

VICAR. I'm afraid Nicodemus will never be persuaded. I think I had better go and break the sad news to Mr Hollycock.

LUKE. Wait a minute, Mr Giles, wait a minute; I want to speak to Nicodemus. [*Sits in front of him.*] Nic, you ain't all made of wood, are ye? Of course you ain't. There's a soft part of humanity in ye somewhere, or ye'd never have had a liking for Rebecca in the first place. Now what's wrong with you is that you've never let yourself go with her. You've walked with her, and talked with her about crops and cattle and things like that. But have ye ever kissed her?

NICODEMUS. No.

LUKE [*to others*]. Didn't I tell ye? [*To Nicodemus*] Ye don't know what it is to kiss a woman?

NICODEMUS. No.

LUKE. And the reason has been because you were afraid? [*Nicodemus has no answer to this.*] You've been afraid because Rebecca was too strange to ye. Now you've been dying many a time to kiss her, but ye hadn't that freedom. So ye didn't. And to this day ye don't know the joy that's in a kiss.

VICAR. But really, Mr Greenwell, I don't think you should talk like that. It's not done.

LUKE. Vicars are good for lots of things, sitting at death-beds and things like that, but this is a case for real imagination. [*To Nicodemus*] To kiss a woman, Nic, is one of the grandest sensations that the heart of man can experience. Just imagine it—a pretty woman like Rebecca in your arms, yours completely . . . looking into these blue eyes of hers, then down on

that pretty mouth smiling for ye, man, smiling for ye—and just like rose petals dipped in dew. Doesn't the very thought of it make ye tremble with joy? [*Nicodemus is becoming impressed.*] It's only natural that ye can't steal this joy with a woman that's only courted by ye. But when she becomes yours, man, yours for ever and a day . . . And when ye know that these eyes and rosy lips are yours all the time . . . Don't ye think you're missing something?

NICODEMUS. Well, I may be.

LUKE. Then picture yourself working out in the fields—and ye won't have your mother for ever, you know—picture yourself working out in them fields knowing that you're going home to a pretty girl dressed in a pretty frock ready to wait on ye hand and foot—ready to kiss ye when ye come home, grimy face and all. A nice clean little house—food that's cooked with loving hands to perfection. Then sitting together beside the fire just looking at each other and whispering sweet words in each other's ear. Wouldn't ye call that real happiness?

NICODEMUS. I believe I would.

[*There is some excitement now, for they all see that Luke is making an impression.*]

LUKE. Well, then, realize that life can give you no more than that, Nic Greenwell—not a drop of happiness more, no matter how great you may be in this world, no matter how rich you may be. Ye have everything that the heart of man can desire. Am I right?

NICODEMUS. I believe you are.

LUKE. And do ye realize how near ye are to missing all this? For, mark ye, if ye let this chance slip you'll never get another woman to look ye in the face again. [*Nicodemus rises slowly. They instinctively get closer to Luke and him. Luke rises too.*] Ye have only minutes between a life of happiness

and a life of misery. Mr Giles is prepared to wait another five minutes, but no more. Isn't that right, vicar?

VICAR. Five minutes only, Mr Greenwell.

LUKE [*to Nicodemus*]. Eyes as blue as the skies—lips like red roses—loving hands that will cook to perfection. . . . Nic, ye have five minutes.

[Nicodemus pauses for a second or two. Then he makes up his mind very definitely and hurries off to the room to dress. There is silent rejoicing. They all shake Luke's hand, who puts a finger over his mouth to warn them to be silent. Emma, after signing with her hands that she is going to get ready to go to church, goes out. Jonathan gets a bottle of whisky from the cupboard. Matilda gets the glasses. Drinks are handed round, and they drink a silent toast. This silent business to be timed to give Nicodemus time to change. Nicodemus puts his head round the door—just his head, for he is already undressed.]

NICODEMUS. Father, give me a hand with this stud.

JONATHAN. The hairpin, Matilda—the hairpin!

[Matilda hurries and gives him the hairpin. Jonathan hurries off to the room.]

[Luke signs to the vicar to sit down. They both sit. Luke empties his glass, and signs to Matilda to fill it again. He nods his head to the vicar to drink up and have another. The vicar signs back that he can't, slipping an imaginary ring on his finger, reminding Luke that he has a wedding to perform. Luke agrees that one glass is enough, but after the wedding is over they'll have another one together. The vicar agrees. Jonathan returns with the news that Nicodemus is

hurrying at a great speed. He looks in the mirror and arranges his tie and flower. Matilda hurries and puts her hat on. Luke drinks up and rises, buttoning his coat. The vicar rises, calls them together, and whispers something to them. They all agree. It is that he would be better to go on and leave them to follow. He is on his way out when Emma returns, much paler, and all out of breath. She signs to the vicar to wait till she gets her breath back. They all look at her. There is a pause. Nicodemus enters with his waistcoat and coat in his hand in a great hurry. When he sees them all standing looking at Emma he senses that something is wrong.

VICAR. What is it, Miss Hollycock? You look quite upset.

EMMA. It's Rebecca, Mr Giles, Rebecca . . .

NICODEMUS. What's the matter with my Rebecca?

[They look at Nicodemus, then back again to Emma.]

EMMA. Rebecca . . . she's ran off with the best man!

[They can only stare at the palpitating Emma. Then the curtain is lowered.]

